ETHEL M. DELL

The Eleventh Hour





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Ethel M. Dell

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CHAPTER I HIS OWN GROUND

"Oh, to be a farmer's wife!"

Doris Elliot paused, punt-pole in hand, to look across a field of corn-sheaves with eyes of shining appreciation.

Her companion, stretched luxuriously

on his back on a pile of cushions, smiled a contemplative smile and made no comment.

The girl's look came down to him after a moment. She regarded him with friendly contempt.

"You're very lazy, Hugh," she said.

"I know it," said Hugh Chesyl comfortably.

She dropped the pole into the water and drove the punt towards the bank. "It's a pity you're such a slacker," she said.

He removed his cigarette momentarily. "You wouldn't like me any better if I weren't," he said.

"Indeed I should—miles!"

"No, you wouldn't." His smile became more pronounced. "If I were more energetic, I should be for ever pestering you to marry me. And, you know, you wouldn't like that. As it is, I take 'No,' for an answer and rest content."

Doris was silent. Her slim, white-clad figure was bent to the

task of bringing the punt to a pleasant anchorage in an inviting hollow in the grassy shore. Hugh Chesyl clasped his hands behind his head and watched her with placid admiration.

The small brown hands were very capable. They knew exactly what to do, and did it with precision. When they

had finally secured the punt, with him in it, to the bank he sat up.

"Are we going to have tea here? What a charming spot! Sweetly romantic, isn't it? I wonder why you particularly want to be a farmer's wife?"

Doris's pointed chin still looked slightly scornful. "You wouldn't wonder if you took the trouble to reflect, Mr. Chesyl," she said.

He laughed easily. "Oh, don't ask me to do that! You know what a sluggish brain mine is. I can quite understand your not wanting to marry me, but why you should want to marry a farmer—like Jeff Ironside—I cannot

see."

"Who is Jeff Ironside?" she demanded.

"He's the chap who owns this property. Didn't you know? A frightfully energetic person; prosperous, too, for a wonder. But an absolute tinker, my dear. I shouldn't marry him—all his fair acres notwithstanding—if I were

you. I don't think the county would approve."

Doris snapped her fingers with supreme contempt. "That for the county! What a snob you are!"

"Am I?" said Hugh. "I didn't know."

She nodded severely.

"Do you mind
moving your legs? I
want to get at the

tea-basket."

"Don't mention it!" he said accommodatingly. "Are you going to give me tea now? How nice! You are looking awfully pretty to-day, do you know? I can't think how you do it. There isn't a feature in your face worth mentioning, but, notwithstanding, you make an entrancing

whole."

Doris sternly repressed a smile. "Please don't take the trouble to be complimentary."

Hugh groaned.
"There's no pleasing you. And still you haven't let me into the secret as to why you want to be a farmer's wife."

Doris was unpacking

the tea-things energetically. "You never
understand anything
without being told,"
she said. "Don't you
know that I positively
hate the life I live
now?"

"I can quite believe it," said Hugh Chesyl. "But, if you will allow me to say so, I think your remedy would be worse than the disease. Your utmost

ingenuity will fail to persuade me that the life of a farmer's wife would suit you."

"I should like the simplicity of it," she maintained.

"And getting up at five in the morning to make the butter? And having a hulking brute of a husband—like Jeff Ironside—tramping into your kitchen

with his muddy boots and beastly clothes (which you would have to mend) just when you had got things into good order? I can see you doing it!" Hugh Chesyl's speech went into his easy, high-bred laugh. "You of all people—the dainty and disdainful Miss Elliot, for whom no man is good enough!"

"I don't know why you say that." There was quick protest in the girl's voice. She clattered the cups and saucers as if something in the lazy argument had exasperated her. "I like a man who is a man—the hard, outdoor, wholesome kind-who isn't afraid of taking a little trouble—who knows what he wants and how to get it. I shouldn't quarrel with him on the score of muddy boots. I should be only glad that he had enough of the real thing in him to go out in all weathers and not to care."

"All of which is aimed at me," said Hugh to the trees above him. "I'm afraid I'm boring you more than usual this afternoon."

"You can't help it," said Doris.

Hugh Chesyl's good-looking face crumpled a little, then smoothed itself again to its usual placid expression. "Ah, well!" he said equably, "we won't quarrel about it. Let's have some tea!"

He sat up in the punt and looked across at her; but she would not meet his eyes, and there ensued a considerable pause before he said gently, "I'm sorry you are not happy, you know."

"Are you?" she said.

"Yes. That's why I want you to marry me."

"Should I be any happier if I did?" said Doris, with a smile

that was somehow slightly piteous.

"I don't know." Hugh
Chesyl's voice was
as pleasantly vague
as his personality. "I
shouldn't get in your
way at all, and, at
least, you would have
a home of your own."

"To be miserable in," said Doris, with suppressed vehemence.

"I don't know why you should be miserable," he said. "You wouldn't have anything to do that you didn't like."

She uttered a laugh that caught her breath as if it had been a sob. "Oh, don't talk about it, Hugh! I should be bored—bored to death. I want the real thing—the real

thing—not a polite substitute."

"Sorry," said Hugh imperturbably. "I have offered the utmost of which I am capable. May I have my tea here, please? It's less trouble than scrambling ashore."

She acceded to his request without protest; but she stepped on to the bank herself, and

sat down with her back to a corn-sheaf. Very young and slender she looked sitting there with the sunshine on her brown, elf-like face, but she was by no means without dignity. There was a fairy queenliness about her that imparted an indescribable charm to her every movement. Her eyes were grey and

fearless.

"How lovely to own a field like this!" she said. "And plough it and sow it and watch it grow up, and then cut it and turn it into sheaves! How proud the man who owns it must be!"

Something stirred on the other side of the sheaf, and she started a little and glanced backwards.

"What's that?"

"A rat probably," said Hugh Chesyl serenely from his couch in the punt. "I expect the place is full of 'em. Won't you continue your rhapsody? The man who owns this particular field is a miller as well as a farmer. He grinds his own grain."

"Oh, is he that man?" Eagerly she broke in. "Does he live in that perfectly exquisite old red-brick house on the water with the wheel turning all day long? Oh, isn't he lucky?"

"I doubt if he thinks so," said Hugh Chesyl. "I've never met a contented farmer yet."

"I don't like people to be too contented," said Doris perversely. "It's a sign of laziness and—yes—weakness of purpose."

"Oh, is it?" Again he uttered his good-tempered laugh; then, as he began to drink his tea, he gradually sobered. "Has anything happened lately to make you specially discontented with your lot?" he asked presently.

Doris's brows contracted. "Things are always happening. My stepmother gets more unbearable every day. I sometimes think I will go and work for my living, but my father won't hear of it. And what can I do? I haven't qualified for anything. The only thing open to me is to fill a post of unpaid companion to a rich

and elderly cousin
who would put up
with me but doesn't
much want me. She
lives at Kensington,
too, and I can breathe
only in the country."

"Poor little girl!" said Hugh kindly.

"Oh, don't pity me!" she said quickly. "You can't do anything to help. And I shouldn't grumble to you if there were anyone

else to grumble to." She leaned back against her sheaf with her eyes on the sunlit water below. "I suppose I shall just go on in the same old way till something happens. Anyhow, I can't see my way out at present. It's such a shame to be unhappy, too, when life might be so ecstatic."

"How could life be

ecstatic?" asked Hugh, passing up his cup to be refilled.

She threw him a quick glance. "You wouldn't understand if I were to tell you," she said. "It never could be—for you."

He sighed. "I know I'm very limited. But it's a mistake to expect too much from life, believe me. Ask but little, and

perhaps—if you're lucky—you won't be disappointed."

"I would rather have nothing than that," she said quickly.

Hugh Chesyl turned and regarded her curiously. "Would you really?" he said.

She nodded several times emphatically. "Yes; just live my own life out-of-doors

and do without everything else." She pulled a long stalk of corn from the sheaf against which she rested and looked at it thoughtfully. Her eyes were downcast, and the man in the punt could not see the deep shadow of pain they held. "If I can't have corn," she said slowly, with the air of one pronouncing

sentence, "I won't have husks. I will die of starvation sooner."

And with that very suddenly she rose and walked round the sheaf.

The movement was abrupt, so abrupt that Hugh Chesyl lifted his brows in astonishment. He was still more surprised a moment later when he heard her clear,

girlish voice raised in admonition.

"I don't think it's very nice of you to lie there listening and not to let us know."

Hugh sat upright in the punt. Who on earth was it that she was reproving thus?

The next moment he saw. A huge man with the frame of a bull rose from behind the

sheaf and confronted his young companion. He had his hat in his hand, and the afternoon sun fell full upon his uncovered head, revealing a rugged, clean-shaven face that had in it a good deal of British strength and a suspicion of gipsy alertness. To Chesyl's further amazement he did not appear in the least abashed by

the encounter.

"I'm sorry I overheard you," he said, with blunt deference. "I was half-asleep at first. Afterwards, I didn't like to intrude."

Doris's grey eyes looked him up and down for a moment or two in silence, and a flush rose in her tanned face. It seemed to Hugh that she was likely

to become the more embarrassed of the two, and he wondered if he ought to go to the rescue.

Then swiftly Doris collected her forces. "I suppose you know you are trespassing?" she said.

At that Hugh laid himself very suddenly down again in the bottom of the boat, and left her to fight

her own battles.

The man on the bank looked down at his small assailant with a face of grim decorum. "No, I didn't know," he said.

"Well, you are," said Doris. "All this ground is private property. You can see for yourself. It's a cornfield."

The intruder's eyes

travelled over the upstanding sheaves, passed gravely over the man in the punt, and came back to the girl. "Yes; I see," he said stolidly.

"Then don't you think you'd better go?" she said.

He put his hat on somewhat abruptly. "Yes. I think I had better," he said, and with that he turned

on his heel and walked away through the stubble.

"Such impertinence!" said Doris, as she stepped down the bank to her companion.

"It was rather," said Hugh.

She looked at him somewhat sharply. "I don't see that there is anything to laugh

at," she said.

"Don't you?" said Hugh.

"No. Why are you laughing?"

Hugh explained. "It only struck me as being a little funny that you should order the man off his own ground in that cavalier fashion."

"Hugh!" Genuine

dismay shone in the girl's eyes. "That wasn't—wasn't—"

"Jeff Ironside? Yes, it was," said Hugh. "I wonder you have never come across him before. He works like a nigger."

"Hugh!" Doris collapsed upon the bank in sheer horror. "I have seen him before—seen him several times.

I thought he was just—a labourer—till to-day."

"Oh, no," said Hugh.
"He's just your hard,
outdoor, wholesome
farmer. Fine animal,
isn't he? Always
reminds me of a prize
bull."

"How frightful!" said Doris with a gasp. "It's the worst faux pas I have ever made."

"Cheer up!" said
Hugh consolingly.
"No doubt he was
flattered by the little
attention. He took it
very well."

"That doesn't make matters any better," said Doris. "I almost wish he hadn't."

Whereupon Hugh laughed again. "Oh, don't wish that! I should think he would be quite a nasty

animal when roused. I shouldn't have cared to fight him on your behalf. He could wipe the earth with me were he so minded."

Doris's eyes, critical though not unkindly, rested upon him as he lay. "Yes," she said thoughtfully, "I should almost think he could."

CHAPTER II THE PLOUGHMAN

It was on a day six weeks later that Doris Elliot next found herself upon the scene of her discomfiture. She had ridden from her home three miles distant very early on a morning of September to join a meeting of the foxhounds and

go cub-hunting. There had been a heavy fall of rain, and the ground was wet and slippery.

The field that had been all yellow with the shocks of corn was now in process of being ploughed, and her horse Hector sank up to the fetlocks at every stride, a fact which he resented with obvious

impatience. She guided him down to the edge of the river where the ground looked a little harder.

The run was over and she had enjoyed it; but she wanted now to take as short a cut home as possible, and it was through this particular field that the most direct route undoubtedly lay. She was alone, but she

knew every inch of the countryside, and but for this mischance of the plough she would have been well on her way. Being a sportswoman, she made the best of things, and did her utmost to soothe her mount's somewhat fiery temper.

"You shall have a clean jump at the end, Hector, old boy,"

she promised him.
"We shall soon be out of it."

But in this matter also she was to receive a check; for when they came to the clean jump, it was to find a formidable fence of wooden paling confronting them, intervening directly in their line of march. It seemed that the energetic

owner had been attending to his boundaries with a zeal that no huntsman would appreciate.

Doris bit her lip with a murmured "Too bad!"

There was nothing for it but to skirt the hedge in search of a gate. Hector was naturally even more indignant than she, and stamped and squealed as she

turned him from the obstacle. He also wanted to get home, and he was tired of fighting his way through ploughed land that held him like a bog. To add to their discomfort it had begun to rain again, and there seemed every prospect of being speedily soaked to the skin.

Altogether the

outlook was depressing; but someone was whistling cheerily on the farther side of the field, and Doris took heart. It was a long way to the gate, however, and when she reached it at length it was to find another disappointment in store. The gate was padlocked.

She looked round in

desperation. Her only chance of escape was apparently to return by the way she had come by means of a gap which had not yet been repaired, and which would lead her in directly the opposite direction to that which she desired to take.

The rain was coming down in a sharp shower, and Hector

was becoming more and more restive. She halted him by the gate and looked over. Beyond lay a field from which she knew the road to be easily accessible. She hated to turn her back upon it.

Behind her over a rise came the plough, drawn by two stout horses, driven by a sturdy figure that

loomed gigantic against the sky. Glancing back, Doris saw this figure, and an odd little spirit of dare-devilry entered into her. She did not want to come face to face with the ploughman, neither did she want to beat a retreat before the five-barred gate that opposed her progress.

She spoke to Hector

reassuringly and backed him several paces. He was quick to grasp her desire and eager to fall in with it. She felt him bracing himself under her, and she laughed in sheer delight as she set him at the gate.

He went at it with a will over the broken ground, rose as she lifted him, and made

a gallant effort to clear the obstacle. But he was too heavily handicapped. He slipped as he rose to the leap. He blundered badly against the top bar of the gate, finally stumbled over and fell on the other side, pitching his rider headlong into a slough of trampled mud.

He was up in a moment and careering across the field, but Doris was not so nimble. It was by no means her first tumble, nor had it been wholly unexpected; but she had fallen with considerable violence, and it took her a second or two to collect her wits. Then, like Hector, she sprang up—only

to reel back through the slippery mud and catch at the splintered gate for support, there to cling sick and dizzy, with eyes fast shut, while the whole world rocked around her in chaos indescribable.

A full minute must have passed thus, then very suddenly out of the confusion came a

voice. Vaguely she recognized it, but she was too occupied in the struggle to keep her senses to pay much attention to what it said.

"I mustn't faint!" she gasped desperately through her set teeth. "I mustn't faint!"

A steady arm encircled her, holding her up.

"You'll be all right in half a minute," said the voice, close to her now. "You came down rather hard."

She fought with herself and opened her eyes. Her head was swimming still, but she compelled herself to look.

Jeff Ironside was beside her, one foot lodged upon the lowest bar of the

gate while he propped her against his bent knee.

He looked down at her with a certain sternness of demeanour that was characteristic of him. "Take your time," he said. "It was a nasty knock-out."

"I—I'm all right," she told him breathlessly. "Where—where is Hector?"

"If you mean your animal," he said in the slow, grim way which she began to remember as his, "he is probably well on his way home by now. He'll be all right," he added. "The gate from this field into the road is open."

"Oh!" The faintness was overcoming her again as she tried to stand. She clutched

and held his arm.
"I'm sorry," she
whispered. "I—never
felt so stupid before."

"Don't be in a hurry!" he said. "You can't help it."

She sank back against his support again and so remained for a few seconds. He stood like a rock till she opened her eyes once more.

She found his own upon her, but he dropped them instantly. "You are not hurt anywhere, are you?" he said.

She shook her head. "No, it's nothing. I've wrenched my shoulder a little, but it isn't much."

"Which shoulder?"

"The right. No, really it isn't serious." She

winced as he touched it with his hand nevertheless.

"Sure?" he said.

He began to feel it very carefully, and she winced again with indrawn breath.

"It's only bruised," she said.

"It's painful, anyhow," he remarked bluntly. "Well, you must be

wet to the skin. You had better come with me to the mill and get dry."

Doris flushed a little. "Oh, thank you, but really—I don't want to—to trespass on your kindness. I can quite well walk home—from here."

"You can't," he said flatly. "Anyhow, you are not going to try. You had better let me

carry you."

But Doris drew back at that with swift decision. "Oh no! I am quite well now—I can walk."

She stood up and he took his foot from the gate. She glanced at the top bar thereof that hung in splinters.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured apologetically.

He also looked at his damaged property. "Yes, it was a pity you attempted it," he said.

"I shall know better next time," she said with a wry smile. "Will it cost much?"

"Well, it can't be mended for nothing," said Jeff Ironside. "Things never are."

Doris considered

him for a moment. He was certainly a fine animal, as Hugh Chesyl had said, well made and well put together. She liked the freedom of his pose, the strength of the great bull neck. At close quarters he certainly did not look like an ordinary labourer. He had an air of command that his rough clothes could not hide. There

was nothing of the clod-hopper about him albeit he followed the plough. He was obviously a son of the soil, and he would wrest his living therefrom, but he would do it with brain as well as hands. He had a wide forehead above his somewhat sombre eyes.

"I am very sorry," she said again.

"I am sorry for you," he said. "Wouldn't it be as well to get out of this rain? It's only a step to the mill."

She turned with docility and looked towards the two horses standing patiently where he had left them on the brown slope of the hill.

"Not that way," he said. "Come across

this field to the road. It is no distance from there."

Doris began to gather up her skirt. It was wet through and caked with mud. She caught her breath again as she did it. The pain in her shoulder was becoming intense.

And then, to her amazement, Jeff Ironside suddenly

stooped and put his arms about her. Almost before she realized his intention, and while she was still gasping her astonishment, he had lifted her and begun to move with long, easy strides over the sodden turf.

"Oh," she said,
"you—you—really
you shouldn't!"

"It's the only thing to

do," he returned.

And somehow—
perhaps because
he spoke with such
finality—she did
not feel inclined to
dispute the point.
She submitted with a
confused murmur of
thanks.

CHAPTER III
THE APOLOGY

On an old oaken settle, cushioned like a church-pew, before a generous, open fire, Doris began to forget her woes. She looked about her with interest the while she endeavoured to sip a cup of steaming milk treated with brandy that Jeff Ironside had brought her.

An old, old woman

hobbled about the oak-raftered kitchen behind her while Jeff himself knelt before her and unlaced her mud-caked boots. She would have protested against his doing this had protest been of the smallest avail, but when she attempted it he only smiled a faint, grim smile and continued his task.

As he finally drew them off she thanked him in a small, shy voice. "You are very kind-much kinder than I deserve," she said. "Do you know I've often thought that I ought to have come to apologize for-for ordering you off your own ground that day in the summer?"

He looked up at her

as he knelt, and for the first time she heard him laugh. There was something almost boyish in his laugh. It transformed him utterly, and it had a marvellous effect upon her.

She laughed also and was instantly at her ease. She suddenly discovered that he was young in spite of his ruggedness, and

she warmed to him in consequence.

"But I really was sorry," she protested. "And I knew I ought to have told you so before. But, somehow"—she flushed under his eyes-"I hadn't the courage. Besides, I didn't know you."

"It wasn't a very serious offence, was it?" he asked.

"I should have been furious in your place," she said.

"It takes more than that to make me angry," said Jeff Ironside.

She put out her hand to him impulsively, the flush still in her cheeks.

"I am still perfectly furious with myself," she told him,

"whenever I think about it."

His hand enclosed hers in an all-envel-oping grasp. "Then I shouldn't think about it any more if I were you," he said.

"Very well, I won't," said Doris; adding with her own quaint air of graciousness, "and thank you for being so friendly about it."

He released her hand somewhat abruptly and got to his feet. "How is your shoulder now? Any better?"

"Oh, yes, it's better," she assured him. "Only rather stiff. Now, won't you sit down and have your breakfast? Please don't bother about me any more; l've wasted quite enough of your time."

He turned towards the table. "You must have some too. And then, when you're ready, I will drive you home."

"Oh, but that will waste your time still more," she protested. "I'm sure I can walk."

"I'm sure you won't try," he rejoined with blunt deliberation. "I hope you don't mind eating in the kitchen, Miss Elliot. I would have had a fire in the parlour if I had expected you."

"But, of course, I don't mind," she said. "And it's quite the finest old kitchen I've ever seen."

He turned to the old woman who still hovered in the background. "All right, Granny. Sit down and have your

own."

"I'll wait on the lady first, Master Jeff," she returned, smiling upon him.

"No. I'm going to wait on the lady," said Jeff. "You sit down."

He had his way. It occurred to Doris that he usually did so. And presently he was waiting upon her as she lay against the

cushions, as though she had been a princess in distress.

Their intimacy progressed steadily during the meal, and very soon Doris's shyness had wholly worn away. She could not quite decide if Jeff were shy or not. He was obviously quiet by nature. But his grimness certainly disappeared, and

more than once she found herself wondering at his consideration and thought for her.

He went out after breakfast to put in the horse, and at once his old housekeeper expanded into ardent praise of him.

"He works as hard as ten men," she said. "That's how it is he

gets on. I often think to myself that he works harder than he ought. It's all work and no play with him. But there, it's no good my talking. He only laughs at me, though I brought him up from his cradle. And a fine baby he was to be sure. His poor mother—she came of gentlefolk, ran away from home she did to marry

Farmer Ironside—she died three days after he was born, which was a pity, for the old master was just wrapped up in her, and was never the same again. Well, as I was saying, his poor mother, she'd set her heart on his being given the education of a gentleman; which he was, but he always clung to the land did Master Jeff. He was

sent to Fordstead Grammar School along with the gentry, and a fine figure he cut there. But then his father died, and he had to settle down to farming at seventeen, and he's been farming ever since. He's very well-to-do is Master Jeff, thanks to his own energy and perseverance; for farming isn't what it was. But it's time

he took a rest and looked about him. He's thirty come Michaelmas, and he ought to be settling down. As I say to him: 'Granny Grimshaw won't be here for always, and you won't like any other kind of housekeeper save and unless she's a wife as well.' He always laughs at me," said Granny Grimshaw, shaking

her head. "But it's true as the sun's above us. Master Jeff ought to be stirring himself to find a wife. But he'll go to the gentry for one, same as his father did before him. He won't be satisfied with any of them saucy country lasses. He don't ever mix with them. He'll look high will Master Jeff if the time ever comes that

he looks at all. He's a gentleman himself right through to the backbone, and he'll marry a lady."

By the time Jeff returned to announce that the rain had ceased and the cart was waiting, there were not many of his private affairs of the knowledge of which Doris had not been placed in possession.

She was smiling a little to herself over the old woman's garrulous confidences when he entered, and it was evident that he caught the smile, for he looked from her to his housekeeper with a touch of sharpness.

Granny Grimshaw hastened to efface herself with apologetic promptitude, and

retired to the scullery to wash up.

Doris turned at once to her host. "Will you take me over the mill some day?" she asked.

He looked momentarily surprised at the suggestion, and then in a second he smiled. "Of course. When will you come?"

"On Sunday?" she

ventured.

"It won't be working then."

"No. But other days you are busy."

Jeff dropped upon his knees again in front of her, and turned his attention to brushing the worst of the mud from her skirt. He attacked it with extreme vigour, his smooth lips firmly

shut.

At the end of nearly a minute he paused. "I shan't be too busy for that any day," he said.

"Not really?" Doris sounded a little doubtful.

He looked at her, and somehow his brown eyes made her lower her own. They held a mastery,

a confidence, that embarrassed her subtly and quite inexplicably.

"Come any time,"
he said, "except
market-day. Mrs.
Grimshaw will always
know where I am to
be found, and will
send me word."

She nodded. "I shall come one morning then. I will ride round, shall I?"

He returned to his task, faintly smiling. "Don't take any five-barred gates on your way!" he said.

"No, I shan't do that again," she promised. "Five-barred gates have their drawbacks."

"As well as their advantages," said Jeff Ironside enigmatically.

CHAPTER IV CORN

"Master Jeff!" The kitchen door opened with a nervous creak and a wrinkled brown face, encircled by the frills of a muslin

nightcap, peered cautiously in. "Are you asleep, my dear?" asked Granny Grimshaw with tender solicitude.

He was sitting at the table with his elbows upon it and his head in his hands. She saw the smoke curling upwards from his pipe, and rightly deduced from this that he was not

asleep.

She came forward, candle in hand. "Master Jeff, you'll pardon me, I'm sure. But it's getting so late—nigh upon twelve o'clock. You won't be getting anything of a night's rest if you don't go to bed."

Jeff raised his head. His eyes, sombre with thought, met hers. "Is it late?" he said abstractedly.

"And you such an early riser," said Granny Grimshaw.

She went across to the fire and began to rake it out, he watching her in silence, still with that sombre look in his dark eyes.

Very suddenly Granny Grimshaw turned and, poker in hand, confronted him. She was wearing a large Paisley shawl over her pink flannel nightdress, but the figure she presented, though quaint, was not unimposing.

"Master Jeff," she said, "don't you be too modest and retiring, my dear. You're just as good as the best of 'em."

A slow, rather hard smile drew the corners of the man's mouth. "They don't think so," he observed.

"They mayn't," said Granny Grimshaw severely. "But that don't alter what is. You're a good man, and, what's more, a man of substance, which is better than can be said for old

Colonel Elliot, with one foot in the grave, so to speak, and up to his eyes in debt. He owes money all over the place, I'm told, and the place is mortgaged for three times its proper value. His wife has a little of her own, so they say; but this poor young lady as was here this morning, she'll be thrown on the world

without a penny to her name. A winsome young lady, too, Master Jeff. And she don't look as if she were made to stand many hard knocks. She may belong to the county, as they say, but her heart's in the right place. She'd make a bonny mistress in this old place, and it wants a mistress badly enough. Old Granny

Grimshaw has done her best, my dear, and always will. But she isn't the woman she was." An odd, wheedling note crept into the old woman's voice. "She'll be wanting to sit in the chimney-corner soon, Master Jeff, and just mind the little ones. You wouldn't refuse her that?"

Jeff rose abruptly

and went across to the fire to knock the ashes from his pipe. Having done so, he remained bent for several seconds, as though he were trying to read his fortune in the dying embers. Then very slowly he straightened himself and spoke.

"I think you forget," he said, "that Colonel Elliot was the son of an earl."

But Granny Grimshaw remained unabashed and wholly unimpressed. She laid down the poker with decision. "I was never one to sneer at good birth," she said. "But I hold that you come of a breed as old and as good as any in the land. Your father was a yeoman of the good old-fashioned sort;

and your mother well, everyone hereabouts knows that she was a lady born and bred. I don't see what titles have to do with breeding," said Granny Grimshaw stoutly. "Not that I despise the aristocracy. Dear me, no! But when all is said and done, no man can be better than a gentleman, and no woman can look

higher. And there are gentlemen in every walk of life just the same as there are the other sort. And you, Master Jeff, you're one of the gentlemen."

Jeff laughed a somewhat grim laugh, and turned to put out the lamp.

"You're a very nice old woman, Granny," he said. "But you

are not an impartial judge."

"Ah, my dearie," said Granny Grimshaw, "but I know what women's hearts are made of."

A somewhat irrelevant retort, which nevertheless closed the discussion.

They went upstairs together, and parted on the landing.

"And you'll go to bed now, won't you?" urged Granny Grimshaw.

"All right," said Jeff.

But once in his own room he went to the low lattice-window that overlooked the mill-stream, and stood before it looking gravely forth over the still water. It was a night of many stars. Beyond

the stream there stretched a dreamvalley across which the river mists were trailing. The tall trees in the meadows stood up with a ghostly magnificence against them. The whole scene was one of wondrous peace, and all, as far as he could see, was his. But the man's eyes brooded over his acres with a dumb

dissatisfaction, and when he turned from the window at last it was with a gesture of hopelessness.

"God help me for a fool!" he muttered between his teeth. "If I went near her, they would kick me out by the back door."

He began to undress with savage energy, and finally flung himself down on the

old four-poster in which his father had lain before him, lying there motionless, with fixed and sleepless eyes, while the hours went by over his head.

Once—it was just before daybreak—he rose and went again to the open window that overlooked his prosperous valley. A change had come

over the face of it. The mists were lifting, lifting. He saw the dark forms of cattle standing here and there. The river wound, silent and mysterious, away into the dim, quiet distance. A church clock struck, its tone vague and remote as a voice from another world. And as if in answer to its solemn call a

lark soared upwards from the meadow by the mill-stream with a burst of song.

The east was surely lightening. The night was gone. Jeff leaned his burning temple against the window-frame with a feeling akin to physical sickness. He was tired—dead tired; but he knew that he could not

sleep now. The world was waking. From the farmyard round the corner of the house there came the flap of wings and the old rooster's blatant greeting to the dawn.

In another half-hour the whole place would be stirring. He had wasted a whole night's rest.

Fiercely he straightened himself. Surely his brain must be going! Why, he had only spoken to her twice. And then, like a spirit that mocked, the words ran through his brain: "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"

So this was love, was it? This—was love!

With clenched hands he stood looking out to the dawning, while the wild fever leaped and seethed in his veins. He called up before his inner vision the light, dainty figure, the level, grey eyes, fearless, yet in a fashion shy, the glow of the sun-tanned skin, the soft, thick hair, brown in the shadow, gold in the sun.

Straight before him, low in the sky, hung

the morning star. It almost looked as if it were drifting earthwards with all its purity, all its glistening sweetness. drifting straight to the heart of the world. He fixed his eyes upon it, drawn by its beauty almost in spite of himself. It was the only star in the sky, and it almost seemed as if it had a message for him.

But the day was dawning, the star fading, and the message hard to read. Why had she refused to marry Chesyl? he asked himself. The man was lukewarm in speech and action; but that surely was but the way of the world to which he belonged. No excess of emotion was ever encouraged there. Doubtless

behind that amiable mask there beat the same devouring longing that throbbed in his own racing pulses. Surely Doris knew this! Surely she understood her own kind!

He recalled those words of hers that he had overheard, the slow utterance of them as of some pronouncement of doom.

"If I can't have corn, I won't have husks. I will die of starvation sooner."

He had caught the pain in those words. Had Hugh Chesyl failed to do so? If so, Hugh Chesyl was a fool. He had never thought very highly of him, though he supposed him to be clever after his own indolent fashion.

Chesyl was the old squire's nephew and heir—a highly suitable parti for any girl. Yet Doris had refused him, not wholly without ignominy. A gentleman, too! Jeff's mouth twisted. The thought came to him, and ripened to steady conviction, that had Chesyl taken the trouble to woo, he must in time have won. The girl was

miserable enough to admit the fact of her misery, and he offered her marriage with him as a friendly means of escape. On other ground he could have won her. On this ground he was probably the least likely man to win. She asked for corn, and he offered husks. What wonder that she preferred starvation!

His hands were still clenched as he turned from the window. Oh, to have been in Hugh Chesyl's place! She would have had no complaint then to make as to the quality of his offering. He would never have suffered her to go hungry. And yet the feeling that **Hugh Chesyl loved** her lingered still in his soul. Ah, what a

fool! What a fool!

It was nearly three hours later that Jim Dawlish the miller answered Jeff Ironside's gruff morning greeting with an eager, "Have you heard the news, sir?"

Dawlish was of a cheery, expansive disposition, and not much of the village gossip ever escaped him or remained with

him.

"What news?" demanded Jeff.

"Why, about the old Colonel up at the Place, to be sure," said Dawlish, advancing his floury person towards the doorway in which stood the master's square, strong figure.

"Colonel Elliot?" queried Jeff sharply.

"What about him?"

Dawlish wagged a knowing head. "Ah, you may well ask that, sir. He died—early this morning—quite unexpected. Had a fit or some'at. They say it's an open question whether there'll be enough money to bury him. He has creditors all over the county."

"Good heavens!" said Jeff. He drew back swiftly into the open air as if he found the atmosphere of the mill oppressive. "Are you quite sure it's true?" he questioned. "How did you hear?"

"It's true enough," said the miller, with keen enjoyment. "I heard it from the police-sergeant. He says it was so sudden

that there'll have to be an inquest. I'm sorry for the widow and orphans though. It'll fall a bit hard on them."

"Good heavens!" said Jeff again. "Good heavens!"

And then very abruptly he turned and left the mill.

"What's the matter with the boss?" asked

the miller's underling.
"Did the Colonel owe him money too?"

"That's about the ticket," said Jim Dawlish cheerily. "That comes of lending, that does. It just shows the truth of the old saying, 'Stick to your money and your money'll stick to you.' There never was a truer word."

"Wonder if he's lost much?" said the underling speculatively.

Whereupon Jim Dawlish waxed suddenly severe. He never tolerated idle gossip among his inferiors. "And that's no concern of yours, Charlie Bates," he said. "You get on with your work and don't bother your pudden

head about what ain't in no way your business. Mr. Ironside is about the soundest man within fifty miles, and don't you forget it!"

"He wasn't best pleased to hear about the poor old Colonel though for all that," said Charlie Bates tenaciously. "And I'd give something to know what'll come of

it."

If he had known, neither he nor Jim Dawlish would have got through much work that morning.

CHAPTER V A BARGAIN

It was nearly a fortnight after Colonel Elliot's death

that Jeff Ironside
went to the stable
somewhat suddenly
one morning, saddled
his mare, and, without
a word to anyone,
rode away.

Granny Grimshaw was the only witness of his departure, and she turned from the kitchen window with a secret smile and nod.

It was an autumn morning of mist and

sunshine. The beech trees shone golden overhead, and the robins trilled loudly from the clematis-draped hedges. Jeff rode briskly, with too set a purpose to bestow any attention upon these things. He took a short cut across his own land and entered the grounds belonging to the Place by a side drive seldom used.

Thence he rode direct to the front door of the great Georgian house and boldly demanded admittance.

The footman who opened to him looked him up and down interrogatively. "Miss Elliot is at home, but I don't know if she will see anyone," he said uncompromisingly.

"Ask her!" said Jeff

tersely. "My name is Ironside."

While the man was gone he took the mare to a yew tree that shadowed the drive at a few yards' distance and tied her to it. There was an air of grim resolution about all his actions. This accomplished, he returned to the great front door.

As he reached it

there came the sound of light, hastening feet within, and in a moment the half-open door was thrown back. Doris herself, very slim and pale, but withal very queenly in her deep mourning, came forth with outstretched hand to greet him.

"But why did they leave you here?" she said. "Please come

in!"

He followed her in with scarcely a word.

She led him down a long oak passage to a room that was plainly the library, and there in her quick, gracious way she turned and faced him.

"I am very pleased to see you, Mr. Ironside. I was going to write to you to thank you again for all your kindness, but lately—there has been so much to think about—so much to do. I know you will understand. Do sit down!"

But Jeff remained squarely on his feet. "I hope you have quite recovered from your fall?" he said.

"Quite, thank you."
She smiled faintly.
"It seems such an

age ago. Hector came home quite safely too." She broke off short, paused as if seeking for words, then said rather abruptly, "I shall never go hunting again."

"You mean not this year?" suggested Jeff.

She looked at him, and he saw that her smile Was piteous.

"No, I mean never. Everything is to be sold. Haven't you heard?"

He nodded. "Yes, I had heard. I hoped it wasn't true."

"Yes, it is true." Her two hands fastened very tightly upon the back of a chair. There was something indescribably pathetic in the action. She seemed on the verge

of saying more, but in the end she did not say it. She just stood looking at him with the wide grey eyes that tried so hard not to be tragic.

Jeff stood looking back with great sturdiness and not much apparent feeling. He offered no word of condolence or sympathy. Only after a very decided

pause he said, "I wonder what you will do?"

"I am going to London," she said.

"Soon?" Jeff's voice was curt, almost gruff.

"Yes, very soon."
She hesitated
momentarily, then
went on rapidly, as
if it were a relief to
tell someone. "My

father's life was insured. It has left my stepmother enough to live on; but, of course, not here. The place is mortgaged up to the hilt. I have nothing at all. I have got to make my own living."

"You?" said Jeff.

She smiled again faintly, "Yes, I. What is there in that? Lots of women work for

their living."

"You are not going to work for yours," he said.

She thrust the chair from her with a quick little movement of the hands. "I would begin to-morrow—if I only knew how. But I don't-yet. I've got to look about me for a little. I am going first to a cousin at Kensington."

"Who doesn't want you," said Jeff.

She looked at him in sharp surprise. "Who—who told you that?"

"You did," he said doggedly. "At least, you told Mr. Chesyl—in my presence."

"Ah, I remember!"
She uttered a tremulous little laugh. "That was the day

I caught you eavesdropping and ordered you off your own ground."

"It was," said Jeff. "I heard several things that day, and I guessed—other things." He paused, still looking straight at her. "Miss Elliot," he said, "wouldn't it be easier for you to marry than to work for your living?"

The pretty brows went up in astonishment. "Oh!" she said, in quick confusion. "You heard that too?"

"Wouldn't it be easier?" persisted Jeff in his slow, stubborn way.

She shook her head swiftly and vehemently. "I shall never marry Mr. Chesyl," she said with determination.

"Where is he?" asked Jeff.

The soft colour rose in her face at the question. She looked away from him for the first time. "I don't quite know where he is. I believe he is up north somewhere—in Scotland."

"He knows what has been happening here?" questioned Jeff.

She made a slight movement as of protest. "No doubt," she said in a low voice.

Jeff's square jaw hardened. Abruptly he thrust Chesyl out of the conversation. "It doesn't matter," he said. "That isn't what I came to talk about. May I tell you just what I have come for? Will you give me

a patient hearing?"

She turned to him again in renewed surprise. "Of course," she said.

His dark eyes were upon her. "It may not please you," he said slowly, "though I ask you to believe that it is not my intention to give you offence."

"But, of course, I know you would not," she said.

Jeff's fingers clenched upon his riding-switch. He spoke with difficulty, but not without a certain native dignity that made him impressive. "I have come," he said, "just to say to you that if it is possible that no one in your own world is wanting you, I am wanting you. All that

I have is absolutely at your disposal. I heard you say—that day—that you would like to be a farmer's wife. Well—if you really meant it—you have your opportunity."

"Mr. Ironside!"
She was gazing at him in wide-eyed amazement.

A dark flush rose in his swarthy face under her eyes, "I had to say it," he said with heavy deliberation, "though I know I'm only hammering nails into my own coffin. I had to take my only chance of telling you. Of course, I know you won't listen. I'm not of your sort-respectable enough, but not quite-not quite-He broke off grimly, and for an instant his teeth showed

clenched upon his lower lip. "But if by any chance, when everything else has failed," resolutely he went on, "you could bring yourself to think of me-in that way, I shall always be ready, quite ready, for you. That's what I came to say."

He straightened himself upon the words, and made as

if he would turn and leave her. But Doris was too quick for him. She moved like a flash. She came between him and the door. "Please—please," she said, "you mustn't go yet!"

He stopped instantly and she stood before him breathing quickly, her hand upon the door.

She did not speak

again very quickly; she was plainly trying to master considerable agitation.

Jeff waited immovably with eyes unvaryingly upon her. "I don't want to hurry you," he said at last. "I know, of course, what your answer will be. But I can wait for it."

That faint, fugitive smile of hers went

over her face. She took her hand from the door.

"You—you haven't been very—explicit, have you?" she said. "Are you—are you being just kind to me, Mr. Ironside, like—like Hugh Chesyl?"

Her voice quivered as she asked the question, but her eyes met his with direct steadfastness.

He lowered his own very suddenly. "No," he said. "I wouldn't insult you by being kind. I shouldn't ask you to marry me if I didn't love you with all my heart and soul."

The words came quickly, with something of a burning quality. She made a slight movement as if

she were taken by surprise.

After a moment she spoke. "There are two kinds of love," she said. "There's the big, unselfish kind—the real thing; and there's the other—the kind that demands everything, and even then, perhaps, is never satisfied. You hardly know me well enough to—to care for me in the first big way, do you? You don't even know if I'm worth it."

"I beg your pardon," said Jeff Ironside. "I think I do know you well enough for that. Anyhow, if you could bring yourself to marry me, I should be satisfied. The right to take care of you-make you comfortable—wait

on you—that's all I'm asking. That would be enough for me—more than I've dared to hope for."

"That would make you happy?" she asked.

He kept his eyes lowered. "It would be—enough," he repeated.

She uttered a sudden quick sigh. "But

wouldn't you rather marry a woman who was in love with you in just the ordinary way?" she said.

"No," said Jeff curtly.

"It would be much better for you," she protested.

He smiled a grim smile. "I am the best judge of that," he said.

She held out her hand to him. "Mr. Ironside, tell me honestly, wouldn't you despise me if I married you in that way—taking all and giving nothing?"

He crushed her hand in his. The red blood rose to his forehead. He looked at her for a moment—only a moment—and instantly looked away again.

"No," he said, "I shouldn't."

"I should despise myself," said Doris.

"I don't know why you should," he said.

She smiled again with lips that quivered. "No, you don't understand. You're too big for me altogether. I can't say 'Yes,' but I feel very highly honoured

all the same. You'll believe that, won't you?"

"Why can't you say 'Yes'?" asked Jeff.

She hesitated momentarily. "You see, I'm afraid I don't care for you—like that," she said.

"Does that matter?" said Jeff.

She looked at him,

her hand still in his. "Don't you think so?"

"No, I don't," he said, "unless you think you couldn't be happy."

"I was thinking of you," she said gently.

"Of me?" He looked surprised for an instant, and again his eyes met hers in a quick glance. "If you're going to think of me," he said,

"you'll do it. I have told you, you needn't be afraid of my expecting too much."

But she shook her head. "I should be much more afraid of taking too much from you," she said. "The little I could offer would never satisfy you."

"Yes it would," he insisted. "I'm only asking to stand

between you and trouble. It's all I want in life."

Again his eyes were upon her, dark and resolute. His hand held hers in a steady grip. For the first time her own resolution began to falter.

"Let me write to you, Mr. Ironside," she said at last, with a vague idea of softening a refusal that had

become inexplicably hard.

"Write and say 'No'?" said Jeff.

She smiled a little, but her eyes filled with sudden tears. "You make it very hard for me to say 'No," she said.

"I would like to make it impossible," he said.

"Even when I have told you that I can't—that I don't—love you in the ordinary way?" she said almost pleadingly.

"I don't want to be loved in the ordinary way," he answered doggedly.

"I should be a perpetual disappoint-ment to you," she said.

"I would rather have even that than—nothing," said Jeff.

One of the tears ran over and fell upon their clasped hands. "In fact, you want me at any price," she said.

"At any price," said Jeff.

She bent her head and choked back a sob. "And no one else

wants me at all," she whispered.

He stooped towards her. Perhaps for her peace of mind it was as well that she did not see the sudden fire that blazed in his deep-set eyes as he did so.

"So you'll change your mind," he said, after a moment, to the bowed head. "You'll have me—you

will?"

She caught back another sob and said nothing.

He straightened himself sharply. "Miss Elliot, if it's going to make you miserable, you had better send me away. I'll go—if it's for that."

He would have released her hand, but it tightened very

suddenly upon his.
"No, don't go—don't go!" she said.

"But you're crying," muttered Jeff uneasily.

She gave a big gulp and raised her head. The tears were running down her cheeks, but she smiled at him bravely notwithstanding. "I believe I should cry—much more—if

you were to go now," she told him, with a quaint effort at humour.

Jeff Ironside put a strong grip upon himself. His heart was thumping like the strokes of a heavy hammer. "Then you'll have me?" he said.

She put her other hand, with a very winning gesture of confidence, into

his. "I don't see
how I can help it,"
she said. "You've
knocked down all
my obstacles. But
you do understand,
don't you? You
won't—won't—"

"Abuse your trust?
No, never!" said Jeff
Ironside. "I will die by
my own hand sooner."

"Ah, I can't help liking you," Doris said impulsively, as if in explanation or excuse. "You're so big."

"Thank you," Jeff said very earnestly. "And you won't cry any more?"

She uttered a whimsical little laugh. "But I wasn't crying for myself," she said, as she dried her eyes. "I was crying for you."

"Well, you mustn't," said Jeff. "You have given me all I want much more than I dared to hope for." He paused a moment, then abruptly, "You won't think better of it when I'm gone, will you?" he said. "You won't write and say you have changed your mind?"

She gave him her hand again with an

air of comradeship.
"It's a bargain, Mr.
Ironside," she said,
with gentle dignity.
"A very one-sided
one, I fear, but
still—a bargain."

"I beg your pardon," murmured Jeff.

CHAPTER VI

THE WEDDING PRESENT

The marriage of Jeff Ironside to Colonel Elliot's daughter created a sensation in the neighbourhood even greater than that which followed the Colonel's death. But the ceremony itself was strictly private. It took place so quietly and so suddenly very early on a misty October morning that it was over before

most people knew anything about it. Jim Dawlish knew, and was present with old Granny Grimshaw; but, save for the family lawyer who gave away the bride and the aged rector who married them, no one else was in the secret.

Mrs. Elliot knew, but she and her step-daughter had never

been in sympathy, and she had already left the place and gone to town.

Very small and pathetic looked the bride in her deep mourning on that dim autumn morning, but she played her part with queenly dignity, unfaltering, undismayed. If she had acted upon impulse she was fully prepared to face the consequences.

As for Jeff, he was gruff almost to rudeness, so desperate was the turmoil of his soul. Not one word did he address to his bride from the moment of entering the church to that of leaving it save such as were contained in the marriage

service. And even when they passed out together into the grey churchyard he remained grimly silent till she turned with a little smile and addressed him.

"Good-morning, Jeff!" she said, and her slender, ungloved hand, very cold but superbly confident, found its way into his.

He looked down at

her then and found his voice, the while his fingers closed protectingly upon hers. "You're cold," he said. "They ought to have warmed the church."

She turned her face up to the sky. "The sun will be through soon. Will you take me home across the fields?"

"Too wet," said Jeff.

"Not if we keep to the path," she said. "I must just say good-bye to Mr. Webster first."

Mr. Webster was the family lawyer. He came up with stilted phrases of felicitation which sent Jeff instantly back into his impenetrable shell of silence. Doris made reply on his behalf and her own with

a dainty graciousness that covered all difficulties, and finally extricated herself and Jeff from the situation with a dexterity that left him spellbound.

She had her way.
They went by way
of the fields, he and
she alone through
the lifting mist, while
Granny Grimshaw and
Jim Dawlish marched

solemnly back to the mill by the road.

"It's a very good morning's work," asserted Granny Grimshaw with much satisfaction. "I always felt that Master Jeff would never marry any but a lady."

"I'd rather him than me," returned Jim Dawlish obscurely.

Which remark Granny

Grimshaw treated as unworthy of notice.

As Jeff Ironside and his bride neared the last stile the sun came through and shone upon all things.

"I'm glad we came this way," she said.

Jeff said nothing. He never spoke unless he had something to say.

They reached the stile. He strode over and reached back a hand to her. She took it, mounted and stepped over, then sat down unexpectedly on the top bar with the hand in hers.

"Jeff!" she said.

He looked up at her. Her voice was small and shy, her cheeks very delicately flushed.

"What is it?" said Jeff.

She looked down at the brown hand she held, all roughened and hardened by toil, and hesitated.

"Well?" said Jeff.

She turned her eyes upon his face. "Are you going back to work to-day, just as if—as if nothing had happened?" she

asked.

He looked straight back at her. "You don't want me, do you?" he said.

She nodded. "Shall we go for a picnic?" she said.

"A picnic!" He seemed surprised at the suggestion.

She laughed a little. "Do you never go for

picnics? I do—all by myself sometimes. It's rather fun, you know."

"By yourself?" said Jeff.

She rose from her perch. "It's more fun with someone certainly," she said.

Jeff's face reflected her smile for an instant. "All right," he said. "I'll take a holiday for once.
But come home
now and have some
breakfast."

She stepped down beside him. "It's nice of you to give me the very first thing I ask for," she said. "Will you do something else for me?"

"Yes," said Jeff.

"Then will you call me Dot?" she said. "It

was the pet name my mother gave me. No one has used it since she died."

"Dot," repeated Jeff.
"You really want me
to call you that?"

"But, of course," she said, smiling, "you haven't called me anything yet. Please begin at once! It really isn't difficult."

"Very well, Dot,"

he said. "And where are we going for our picnic?"

"Oh, not very far," she said. "Somewhere within a quite easy walk."

"Can't we ride?" suggested Jeff.

"Ride?" She looked at him in surprise.

"I have a horse who would carry you," he

said.

"Have you—have you, really?" Quick pleasure came into her eyes. "Oh, Jeff, how kind of you!"

"No, it isn't," said Jeff bluntly. "I want you to be happy."

She laughed her quick, light laugh. "So you're going to spoil me?" she said.

They reached the pretty Mill House above the stream and found breakfast awaiting them in the oak-panelled parlour that overlooked a sunny orchard.

"How absolutely sweet!" said Doris.

He came and stood beside her at the window, looking silently forth.

She glanced at him half-shyly. "Aren't you very fond of it all?"

"Yes," he said.

"And I think I am going to be," said Doris.

"I hope you will," said Jeff.

She turned from him to Granny Grimshaw who entered at the

moment with a hot dish.

"I don't think we ought to have been married so early," she said. "You must be quite tired out. Now, please, Mrs. Grimshaw, do sit down and let me wait on you for a change!"

Granny Grimshaw smiled at the bare suggestion.

"No, no, Mrs. Ironside, my dear. This is for you and Master Jeff. I've got mine in the kitchen."

"I never heard such a thing!" declared Doris. "Jeff, surely you are not going to allow that!"

Jeff came from the window. "Of course you must join us, Granny," he said.

But Granny Grimshaw was obdurate on that point. "My place is in the kitchen," she said firmly. "And there I must bide. But I am ready to show you the way to your room, my dear, whenever you want to go."

Doris bent forward impulsively and kissed her. "You are much, much too kind

to me, you and Jeff," she said.

But as soon as she was alone with Jeff her shyness returned. She could not feel as much at ease with him in the house as in the open air. She did not admit it even to herself, but deep in her heart she had begun to be a little afraid.

Till then she had

gone blindly forward, taking in desperation the only course that seemed to offer her escape from a position that had become wholly intolerable. But now for the first time misgivings arose within her. She remembered how slight was her knowledge of the man to whom she had thus impetuously

entrusted her future; and, remembering, something of her ready confidence went from her. She fell silent also.

"You are not eating anything," said Jeff. She started at his voice and looked up.

"No, I'm not hungry," she said. "I shall eat all the more presently when we get out into the

open."

He said no more, but finished his own breakfast with businesslike promptitude.

"Mrs. Grimshaw will take you upstairs," he said then, and went to the door to call her.

"Where will you be?" Doris asked him shyly, as he stood back for her to pass. "I am going round to the stable," he said.

"May I come to you there?" she suggested.

He assented gravely: "Do!"

Granny Grimshaw was in her most garrulous mood. She took Doris up the old steep stairs and into the low-ceiled room with the lattice window

that looked over the river meadows.

"It's the best room in the house," she told her. "Master Jeff was born in it, and he's slept here for the past ten years. You won't be lonely, my dear. My room is just across the passage, and he has gone to the room at the end which he always had as a boy."

"This is a lovely room," said Doris.

She stood where Jeff had stood before the open window and looked across the valley.

"I hope you will be very happy here, my dear," said Granny Grimshaw behind her.

Doris turned round to her impetuously. "Dear Mrs. Grimshaw, I don't like Jeff to give up the best room to me," she said. "Isn't there another one that I could have?"

She glanced towards a door that led out of the room in which they were.

"Yes, go in, my dear!" said Granny Grimshaw with a chuckle. "It's all for you."

Doris opened the door with a quick flush on her cheeks.

"Master Jeff thought you would like a little sitting-room of your own," said the old woman behind her.

"Oh, he shouldn't. He shouldn't!" Doris said.

She stood on the threshold of a sunny room that overlooked the garden with its

hedge of lavender and beyond it the orchard with its wealth of ripe apples shining in the sun. The room had been evidently furnished for her especial use. There was a couch in one corner, a cottage piano in another, and a writing-table near the window.

"The old master bought those things

for his bride," said
Granny Grimshaw.
"They are just as
good as new yet, and
Master Jeff has had
the piano put in order
for you. I expect you
know how to play the
piano, my dear?"

Doris went forward into the room. The tears were not far from her eyes. "He is too good to me. He is much too good," she

said.

"Ah, my dear, and you'll be good to him too, won't you?" said Granny Grimshaw coaxingly.

"I'll do my best," said Doris quietly.

She went down to Jeff in the stable-yard a little later with a heart brimming with gratitude, but that

strange, new shyness was with her also. She did not know how to give him her thanks.

He was waiting for her, and escorted her across to the stable. "You will like to see your mount," he said, cutting her short almost before she had begun.

She followed him into the stable. Jeff's

own mare poked an inquiring nose over the door of her loose-box. Doris stopped to fondle her. Jeff plunged a hand into his pocket and brought out some sugar.

From the stall next to them came a low whinny. Doris, in the act of feeding the mare, looked up sharply. The next moment with a little cry she had sprung forward and was in the stall with her arms around the neck of its occupant—a big bay, who nozzled against her shoulder with evident pleasure.

"Oh, Hector! Hector!" she cried. "However did you come here?"

"I bought him," said Jeff, "as a wedding present." "For me? Oh, Jeff!"
She left Hector and came to him with both hands outstretched. "Oh, Jeff, I don't know how to thank you. You are so much too good. What can I say?"

He took the hands and gripped them. His dark eyes looked straight and hard into hers, and a little tremor went through

her. She lowered her own instinctively, and in the same instant he let her go. He did not utter a word, and she turned from him in silence with a face on fire.

She made no further effort to express her gratitude.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF THE PICNIC

Those odd silences of Jeff's fell very often throughout the day, and they lay upon Doris's spirit like a physical weight. They rode through autumn woodlands, and picnicked on the side of a hill. The day was warm and sunny, and the whole world

shone as through a pearly veil. There were blackberries in abundance, large and ripe, and Doris wandered about picking them during the afternoon while Jeff lounged against a tree and smoked.

He did not offer to join her, but she had a feeling that his eyes followed her wherever she

went, and a great restlessness kept her moving. She could not feel at her ease in his vicinity. She wanted very urgently to secure his friendship. She had counted upon that day in his society to do so. But it seemed to be his resolve to hold aloof. He seemed disinclined to commit himself to anything approaching intimacy,

and that attitude of his filled her with misgiving. Had he begun to repent of the one-sided bargain, she asked herself? Or could it be that he also was oppressed by shyness? She longed intensely to know.

The sun was sinking low in the sky when at length reluctantly she went back to him.

"It's getting late," she said. "Don't you think we ought to go home?"

He was standing in the level sun-rays gazing sombrely down into the valley from which already the mists were beginning to rise.

He turned at her voice, and she knew he looked at her, though she did not

meet his eyes. For a moment or two he stood, not speaking, but as though on the verge of speech; and her heart quickened to a nervous throbbing.

Then unexpectedly he turned upon his heel. "Yes. Wait here, won't you, while I go and fetch the animals?"

He went, and a sharp

sense of relief shot through her. She was sure that he had something on his mind; but inexplicably she was thankful that he had not uttered it.

The sun was dropping out of sight behind the opposite hill, and she was conscious of a growing chill in the atmosphere. A cockchafer whirred past her and buried

itself in a tuft of grass hard by. In the wood behind her a robin trilled a high sweet song. From the farther side of the valley came a trail of smoke from a cottage bonfire, and the scent of it hung heavy in the evening air.

All these things she knew and loved, and they were to be hers for the rest of her

life; yet her heart was heavy within her. She turned and looked after Jeff with a wistful drooping of the lips.

He had passed out of sight behind some trees, but as she turned she heard a footfall in the wood close at hand, and almost simultaneously a man emerged carrying a gun.

He stopped at sight of her, and on the instant Doris made a swift movement of recognition.

"Why Hugh!" she said.

He came straight to her, with hand outstretched. "My dear, dear girl!" he said.

Her hand lay in his, held in a clasp such as Hugh Chesyl had never before given her, and then all in a moment she withdrew it.

"Why, where have you come from?" she said, with a little nervous laugh.

His eyes looked straight down to hers. "I've been yachting," he said, "along Argyll and Skye. I didn't know till the day before yesterday about the

poor old Colonel. I came straight back directly I knew, got here this morning, but heard that you had gone to town. I was going to follow you straightway, but the squire wouldn't hear of it. You know what he is. So I had to compromise and spend one night with him. By Jove! it's a bit of luck finding you here. I'm pleased,

Doris, jolly pleased.
I've been worried to death about you—
never moved so fast in my life."

"Haven't you?" said Doris; she was still smiling a small, tired smile. "But why? I don't see."

"Don't you?" said
Hugh. "How shall I
explain? You have
got such a rooted
impression of me as a

slacker that I am half afraid of taking your breath away."

She laughed again, not very steadily. "Oh, are you turning over a new leaf? I am delighted to hear it."

He smiled also, his eyes upon hers. "Well, I am, in a way. It's come to me lately that I've been an utter ass all this time. I expect you've been

thinking the same, haven't you?"

"No, I don't think so," said Doris.

"No? That's nice of you," said Hugh. "But it's the truth nevertheless. I haven't studied the art of expressing myself properly. I can't do it even yet. But it occurred to me-it just occurred to me—that perhaps

l'd never succeeded in making you understand how awfully badly I want to marry you. I think I never told you so. I always somehow took it for granted that you knew. But now-especially now, Doris, when you're in trouble—I want you more than ever. Even if you can't love me as I love you-"

He stopped, for she had flung out her hands with an almost agonized gesture, and her eyes implored him though she spoke no word.

"Won't you listen to me just this once just this once?" he pleaded. "My dear, I love you so. I love you enough for both if you'll only marry me, and give me the chance of making you happy."

An unwonted note of feeling sounded in his voice. He stretched out his hand to her.

"Doris, darling, won't you change your mind? I'm miserable without you."

And then very suddenly Doris found her voice. She spoke with breathless

entreaty. "Hugh, don't—don't! I can't listen to you. I married Jeff Ironside this morning."

His hand fell. He stared at her as if he thought her mad. "You—married—Jeff Ironside! I don't believe it!"

She clenched her hands tightly to still her agitation. "But it's true," she said.

"Doris!" he said.

She nodded vehemently, keeping her eyes on his. "It's true," she said again.

He straightened
himself up with the
instinctive movement
of a man bracing
himself to meet a
sudden strain. "But
why? How? I didn't
even know you knew
the man."

She nodded again. "He helped me once when I was out cubbing, and I went to his house. After that—when he heard that I had nothing to live on—he came and asked me if I would marry him. And I was very miserable because nobody wanted me. So I said 'Yes.'"

Her voice sank. Her

lips were quivering.

"I wanted you," Hugh said.

She was silent.

He bent slowly towards her, looking into her eyes. "My dear, didn't you really know—didn't you understand?"

She shook her head; her eyes were suddenly full of tears. "No, Hugh."

He held out his hand again and took hers. "Don't cry, Doris! You haven't lost much. I shall get over it somehow. I know you never cared for me."

She bent her head with some murmured words he could not catch.

He leaned nearer. "What, dear, what?

You never did, did you?"

He waited for her answer, and at last through tears it came. "I've been struggling so hard, so hard, to keep myself from caring."

He was silent a moment, and again it was as if he were collecting his strength for that which had to be

endured. Then slowly:
"You thought I wasn't
in earnest?" he said.
"You thought I didn't
care enough?"

She did not answer him in words; her silence was enough.

"God forgive me!" whispered Hugh....

There came the thud of horses' hoofs upon the grass, and his hand relinquished

hers. He turned to see Jeff Ironside barely ten paces away, leading the two animals. Very pale but wholly collected, Hugh moved to meet him.

"I have just been hearing about your marriage, Ironside," he said. "May I congratulate you?"

Jeff's eyes, with the red sunlight turning

them to a ruddy brown, met his with absolute directness as he made brief response. "You are very kind."

"Doris and I are old friends," said Hugh.

"Yes, I know," said Jeff.

Spasmodically Doris turned and joined the two men. "We hope Mr. Chesyl will

come and see us sometimes, don't we, Jeff?" she said.

"Certainly," said Jeff, "when he has nothing better to do."

She turned to Hugh with a bright little smile. Her tears were wholly gone, and he marvelled. "I hope that will be often, Hugh," she said.

"Thank you," Hugh

said gravely. "Thank you very much." He added, after a moment, to Jeff: "I shall probably be down here a good deal now. The squire is beginning to feel his age. In fact, he wants me to make my home with him. I don't propose to do that entirely, but I can't leave him alone for long at a time."

"I see," said Jeff.
He glanced towards
Doris. "Shall we start
back?" he said.

Hugh propped his gun against a tree, and stepped forward to mount her. "So you still have Hector," he said.

"Jeff's wedding present," she answered, still smiling.

Lightly she mounted, and for a single moment he felt her passing touch upon his shoulder. Then Hector moved away, stepping proudly. Jeff was already in the saddle.

"Good-bye!" said
Doris, looking back to
him. "Don't forget to
come and see us!"

She was gone.

Hugh Chesyl turned with the sun-rays dazzling him, and groped for his gun.

He found it, shouldered it, and strode away down the woodland path. His face as he went was the face of a man suddenly awakened to the stress and the turmoil of life.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEW LIFE

There was no doubt about it. Granny Grimshaw was not satisfied. Deeper furrows were beginning to appear in her already deeply furrowed face. She shook her head very often with pursed lips when she was alone. And this despite the fact that

she and the young mistress of the Mill House were always upon excellent terms. No difficulties ever arose between them. Doris showed not the smallest disposition to usurp the old housekeeper's authority. Possibly **Granny Grimshaw** would have been better pleased if she had. She spent much of her time

out-of-doors, and when in the house she was generally to be found in the little sitting-room that Jeff had fitted up for her.

She had her meals in the parlour with Jeff, and these were the sole occasions on which they were alone together. If Doris could have had her way, Granny Grimshaw would

have been present at these also, but on this point the old woman showed herself determined, not to say obstinate. She maintained that her place was the kitchen, and that her presence was absolutely necessary there, a point of view which no argument of Doris's could persuade her to relinquish.

So she and Jeff breakfasted, dined, and supped in solitude, and though Doris became gradually accustomed to these somewhat silent meals, she never enjoyed them. Of difficult moments there were actually very few. They mutually avoided any but the most general subjects for conversation. But of

intimacy between them there was none. Jeff had apparently drawn a very distinct boundary-line which he never permitted himself to cross. He never intruded upon her. He never encroached upon the friendship she shyly proffered. Once when she somewhat hesitatingly suggested that he should come to her sitting-room

for a little after supper he refused, not churlishly, but very decidedly.

"I like to have my pipe and go to bed," he said.

"But you can bring your pipe, too," she said.

"No, thanks," said Jeff. "I always smoke in the kitchen or on the step."

She said no more, but went up to her room, and presently Jeff, moodily puffing at his briar in the porch, heard the notes of her piano overhead. She played softly for some little time, and Jeff's pipe went out before it was finished—a most rare occurrence with him.

Only when the piano ceased did he awake

to the fact, and then half-savagely he knocked out its half-consumed contents and turned inwards.

He found Granny
Grimshaw standing
in the passage in a
listening attitude,
and paused to bid her
good-night.

"Be you going to bed, Master Jeff?" she said. "My dear, did

you ever hear the like? She plays like an angel."

He smiled somewhat grimly, without replying.

The old woman came very close to him. "Master Jeff, why don't you go and make love to her? Don't you know she's waiting for you?"

"Is she?" said Jeff,

but he said it in the tone of one who does not require an answer, and with the words very abruptly he passed her by.

Granny Grimshaw shook her head and sighed, "Ah, dear!" after his retreating form.

It was a few days after this that a letter came for Doris, one morning,

bearing the Squire's crest. Her husband handed it to her at the breakfast-table, and she received it with a flush. After a moment, seeing him occupied with a newspaper, she opened it.

"You asked me to come and see you, but I have not done so as I was not sure

if, after all, you meant me to take the invitation literally. We have been friends for so long that I feel constrained to speak openly. For myself, I only ask to go on being your friend, and to serve you in any way possible. But perhaps I can serve you best by keeping away from you. If so, then I will do even that.—Yours ever,

"Hugh."

Something within moved Doris to raise her eyes suddenly, and instantly she encountered Jeff's fixed upon her. The flush in her cheeks deepened burningly. With an effort she spoke:

"Hugh Chesyl wants to know if he may come to see us." "I thought you asked him," said Jeff.

A little quiver of resentment went through her; she could not have said wherefore. "He was not sure if I meant it," she said.

There was an instant's silence; then Jeff did an extraordinary thing. He stretched out his hand across the

table, keeping his eyes on hers.

"Let me have his letter to answer!" he said.

She made a sharp instinctive movement of withdrawal. "Oh, no!" she said. "No!"

Jeff said nothing; but his face hardened somewhat, and his hand remained outstretched.

Doris's grey eyes gleamed. "No, Jeff!" she repeated, more calmly, and with the words she slipped Hugh's envelope into the bosom of her dress. "I can't give you my letters to answer indeed."

Jeff withdrew his hand, and began to eat his breakfast in utter silence.

Doris played with

hers until the silence became intolerable, and then, very suddenly and very winningly, she leaned towards him.

"Dear Jeff, surely you are not vexed!" she said.

He looked at her again, and in spite of herself she felt her heart quicken.

"Are you, Jeff?" she

said, and held out her hand to him.

For a moment he sat motionless, then abruptly he grasped the hand.

"May I say what I think?" he asked her bluntly.

"Of course," she said.

"Then I think from all points of view that you had better leave

Chesyl alone," he said.

"What do you mean?"
Quickly she asked the
question; the colour
flamed in her face
once more. "Tell my
why you think that!"
she said.

"I would rather not," said Jeff.

"But that is not fair of you, Jeff," she protested.

He released her hand slowly. "I am sorry," he said. "If I were more to you, I would say more. As it is—well, I would rather not."

She rose impetuously. "You are very—difficult," she said.

To which he made answer with that silence which was to her more difficult than speech.

Yet later, when she was alone, her sense of justice made her admit that he had not been altogether unreasonable. She recalled the fact that he had overheard that leisurely proposal of marriage that Hugh had made her in the cornfield on the occasion of their first meeting, and her face burned afresh as she remembered

certain other items of that same conversation that he must also have overheard. No. on the whole it was not surprising that he did not greatly care for Hugh-poor Hugh, who loved her and had so narrowly missed winning her for himself. She wondered if Hugh were really very miserable. She herself had passed through

so many stages of misery since her wedding-day. But she had sufficient knowledge of herself to realize that it was the loneliness and lack of sympathy that weighed upon her most.

Her feeling for
Hugh was still
an undeveloped
quantity, though the
certainty of his love

for her had quickened it to keener life. She was not even yet absolutely certain that he could have satisfied her. It was true that he had been deeply stirred for the moment, but how deeply and how lastingly she had no means of gauging. Knowing the indolence of his nature, she was inclined to mistrust

the permanence of his feeling. And so resolutely had she restrained her own feeling for him during the whole length of their acquaintance that she was able still to keep it within bounds. She knew that the sympathy between them was fundamental in character, but she had often suspected—in her

calmer moments she suspected still—that it was of the kind that engenders friendship rather than passion.

But even so, his friendship was essentially precious to her, all the more so for the daily loneliness of spirit that she found herself compelled to endure. For—with

this one exception she was practically friendless. She had known that in marrying Jeff Ironside she was relinquishing her own circle entirely. But she had imagined that there would be compensations. Moreover, so far as society was concerned, she had not had any choice. It had been this or exile. And she had

chosen this.

Wherefore? Simply and solely because Jeff, of all she knew, had wanted her.

Again that curious little tremor went through her. Had he wanted her so very badly after all? Not once since their wedding-day had he made any friendly overture or responded to

any overture of hers. They were as completely strangers now as they had been on the day he had proposed to her.

A sharp little sigh came from her. She had not thought somehow that Jeff would be so difficult. He had told her that he loved her. She had counted on that for the foundation

of their friendship, but no structure had she succeeded in raising thereon. He asked nothing of her, and, save for material comforts, he bestowed nothing in return. True, it was what she had bargained for. But yet it did not satisfy her. She was not at her ease with him, and she began to think she never would be.

As to Hugh, she hardly knew how to proceed; but she finally wrote him a friendly note, concurring with his suggestion that they should not meet again for a little while—"only for a little while, Hugh," she added, almost in spite of herself, "for I can't afford to lose a friend like you."

And she did not guess how the heart-cry of her loneliness echoed through the words.

CHAPTER IX
THE WAY TO BE
HAPPY

It was not until the week before Christmas that Doris saw Hugh again. They met in the hunting-field. It was the first hunt she had attended since her marriage, and she went to it alone.

The meet was some distance away, and she arrived after the start, joining the ranks of the riders as they waited outside a copse which the hounds were drawing.

The day was chill

and grey. She did not altogether know why she went, save that the loneliness at the Mill House seemed to become daily harder to bear, and the longing to escape it, if only for a few hours, was not to be denied.

She was scarcely in a sporting mood, and the sight of old acquaintances, though

they greeted her kindly enough, did not tend to raise her spirits.

The terrible conviction had begun to grow upon her of late that she had committed a great mistake that no effort of hers could ever remedy, and the thought of it weighed her down perpetually night and day.

But the sight of Hugh as he came to her along the edge of the wood was a welcome one. She greeted him almost with eagerness, and the friendly grasp of his hand sent warmth to her lonely young heart.

"I am very glad to see you following the hounds," Hugh said. "Are you alone?" "Quite alone," she said, feeling a lump rise in her throat.

"Then you'll let me take care of you," he said, with a friendly smile.

And she could but smile and thank him.

It was not a particularly satisfactory day from a fox-hunting point of view. The weather did not

improve, and the scent was misleading. They found and lost, found and lost again, and a cold drizzle setting in with the afternoon effectually cooled the ardour of even the most enthusiastic.

Yet Doris enjoyed herself. She and Hugh ate their lunch together under some dripping trees, and

they managed to make merry over it in spite of the fact that both were fairly wet through. He made her share the sherry in his flask, laughing down all protests, treating her with the absolute ease that had always characterized their friendship. It was such a day as Doris had often spent in his company, and the return to the old

genial atmosphere was like the sweetness of a spring day in the midst of winter.

It was he who at length suggested the advisability of returning home. "I'm sure you ought to get back and change," he said. "It'll be getting dark in another hour."

Her face fell, "I have enjoyed it," she said

regretfully.

"You'll come again," said Hugh. "They are meeting at Kendal's Corner on Christmas Eve. I shall look out for you."

She smiled. "Very well, I'll be there. Thank you for giving me such a good time, Hugh."

"My dear girl!" said Hugh.

They rode back together through a driving drizzle, and, as Hugh had predicted, the early dusk had fallen before they reached the mill. The roar of the water sounded indescribably desolate as they drew near, and Doris gave a sharp, involuntary shiver.

It was then that Hugh

drew close to her and stretched out a hand in the growing darkness. "Doris!" he said softly.

She put her own into it swiftly, impulsively. "Oh, Hugh!" she said with a sob.

"Don't!" said Hugh gently. "Stick to it, dear! I think you won't be sorry in the end. I believe he's a good chap. Give

him all you can! It's the only way to be happy."

Her fingers tightened convulsively upon his. She spoke no word.

"Don't, dear!" he said again very earnestly. "It's such a mistake. Honestly, I don't think you've anything to be sorry for. So don't let yourself be faint-hearted! I know he's not a bad sort."

"He's very good," whispered Doris.

"Yes, that's just it," said Hugh. "So don't be afraid of giving! You'll never regret it. No one could help loving you, Doris. Remember that, dear, when you're feeling down! You're just the sweetest woman in the world, and the man who couldn't worship you would be

a hopeless fool."

They were passing over the bridge that spanned the stream. The road was narrow, and their horses moved side by side. They went over it with hands locked.

They were nearing the house when Doris reined in. "Good-bye, dear Hugh!" she said. "You're the truest friend any woman

ever had."

He reined in also. They stood in the deep shadow of some trees close to the gate that led into the Mill House garden. The roar of the water was all about them. They seemed to be isolated from all the world. And so Hugh Chesyl, being moved beyond his wont, lifted the hand that

lay so confidingly in his, and kissed it with all reverence.

"I want you to be happy," he said.

A moment later they parted without further words on either side, he to retrace his steps across the bridge, she to turn wearily in at the iron gate under the dripping trees that led to the Mill

House porch.

She heard a man's step in front of her as she went, and at the porch she found her husband.

"Oh, Jeff!" she said, slightly startled. "I didn't know it was you."

"I've been looking out for you for some time," he said. "You must be very wet." "Yes, it's rained nearly all day, hasn't it? We didn't have much sport, but I enjoyed it." Doris slid down into the hands he held up to her. "Why, you are wet too," she said. "Hadn't you better change?"

"I'll take the horse round first," he said. "Won't you go in?"

She went in with

a feeling of deep depression. Jeff's armour of reserve seemed impenetrable. With lagging feet she climbed the stairs and entered her sitting-room.

A bright fire was burning there, and the lamp was alight. A little thrill of purely physical pleasure went through her at the

sight. She paused to take off her hat, then went forward and stooped to warm her hands at the blaze.

She was certainly very tired. The arm-chair by the hearth was invitingly near. She sank into it with a sigh and closed her eyes.

It must have been ten minutes later that the door, which she had left ajar, was pushed open, and Jeff stood on the threshold.

He was carrying a steaming cup of milk. A moment he paused as if on the verge of asking admittance; then as his eyes fell upon the slight young figure sunk in the chair, he closed his lips and came forward in silence.

A few seconds later,

Doris opened her eyes with a start at the touch of his hand on her shoulder.

She sat up sharply. "Oh, Jeff, how you startled me!"

It was the first time she had ever seen him in her little sitting-room, though she had more than once invited him thither. His presence at that moment was for some

reason peculiarly disconcerting.

"I am sorry," he said, in his slow way. "The door was half open, and I saw you were asleep. I don't think you are wise to sit down in your wet clothes. I have brought you some milk and brandy."

"Oh, but I never take brandy," she said, collecting herself

with a little smile and rising. "It's very kind of you, Jeff. But I can't drink it, really. It would go straight to my head."

"You must drink it," said Jeff.

He presented it to her with the words, but Doris backed away half-laughing.

"No, really, Jeff! I'll go and have a hot bath. That will do quite as well."

"You must drink this first," said Jeff.

There was a dogged note in his voice, and at sound of it Doris's brows went up, and her smile passed.

"I mean it," said
Jeff, setting cup and
saucer on the table
before her. "I can't
run the risk of having

you laid up. Drink it now, before it gets cold!"

A little gleam of mutiny shone in Doris's eyes. "My dear Jeff," she said very decidedly. "I have told you already that I do not drink brandy. I am going to have a hot bath and change, and after that I will have some tea. But I draw the

line at hot grog. So, please, take it away! Give it to Granny Grimshaw! It would do her more good."

She smiled again suddenly and winningly with the words. After all it was absurd to be vexed over such a trifle.

But, to her amazement, Jeff's face hardened. He

stepped to her, and, as if she had been a child, took her by the shoulders, and put her down into a chair by the table.

"Doris," he said, and his voice sounded deep and stern above her head, "I may not get much out of my bargain, but I think I may claim obedience at least. There is not enough brandy there

to hurt you, and I wish you to take it."

She stiffened at his action, as if she would actively resist; but she only became rigid under his hands.

There followed a tense and painful silence. Then without a word Doris took the cup and raised it unsteadily to her lips. In the same moment Jeff took his hands

from her shoulders, straightened himself, and in silence left the room.

CHAPTER X CHRISTMAS EVE

It was only a small episode, but it made an impression upon Doris that she was slow to forget. It was

not that she resented the assertion of authority. She had the fairness to admit his right, but in a very subtle fashion it hurt her. It made her feel more than ever the hollowness of the bargain, to which he had made such grim allusion. It added, moreover, to her uneasiness, making her suspect that he was fully

as dissatisfied as she. Yet, in face of the stony front he presented she could not continue to proffer her friendship. He seemed to have no use for it. He seemed, in fact, to avoid her, and the old shyness that had oppressed her in the beginning returned upon her fourfold. She admitted to herself that she was

becoming afraid of the man. The very sound of his voice made her heart beat thick and hard, and each succeeding day witnessed a diminishing of her confidence.

Under these circumstances she withdrew more and more into her solitude, and it was with something like dismay that

she received the news from Granny Grimshaw at the beginning of Christmas week that it was Jeff's custom to entertain two or three of his farmer friends at supper on Christmas Eve.

"Only the menkind, my dear," said Granny Grimshaw consolingly. "And they're easy enough

to amuse, as all the world knows. Give 'em a good feed, and they won't give any trouble. It's quite a job to get ready for 'em, that it is, but it's the only bit of entertaining he does all the year round, so I don't grudge it."

"You must let me help you," Doris said.

And help she did, protest

notwithstanding, so that Jeff, returning from his work in the middle of the day, was surprised to find her flushed and animated in the kitchen, clad in one of Granny Grimshaw's aprons, rolling out pastry with the ready deftness of a practised pastry-cook.

There was no dismay

in her greeting of him, and only she knew of that sudden quickening of the heart that invariably followed his appearance.

"You didn't tell me about your Christmas party, Jeff," she said. "Granny and I are going to give you a big spread. I hope you will invite me to the feast."

Jeff's dark face flushed a little as he made reply. "I'm afraid you wouldn't enjoy it much."

"But you haven't introduced me to any of your friends yet," she protested. "I should like to meet them."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Jeff.

She looked up at him

for a moment. "Don't you think that's rather a mistake?" she said.

"Why?" said Jeff.

With something of an effort she explained. "To take it for granted that I shall look down on them. I don't want to look down on them, Jeff."

"It isn't that," said Jeff curtly. "But

they're not your sort. They don't talk your language. I'm not sure that I want you to meet them."

"But you can't keep me away from everyone, can you?" she said gently.

He did not answer her, and she returned to her pastry-making in silence.

But evidently her

words had made some impression, for that evening when she rose from the supper table to bid him a formal good-night, he very abruptly reverted to the subject.

"If you really think you can stand the racket on Christmas Eve, I hope you will join the party. There will be only four or

five besides myself. I have never invited the womenkind."

"Perhaps by next
Christmas I shall
have got to know
them a little," said
Doris, "and then we
can invite them too.
Thank you for asking
me, Jeff. I'll come."

But yet she viewed the prospect with considerable misgiving, and would have thankfully foregone the ordeal, if she had not felt constrained to face it.

The preparations went forward under Granny Grimshaw's guidance without a hitch, but they were kept busy up to the last moment, and on the day before Christmas Eve Doris scribbled a hasty note to Hugh Chesyl, excusing herself from attending the meet.

It was the only thing to be done, for she could not let him expect her in vain, but she regretted it later when at the breakfast-table the following day her husband silently handed to her Hugh's reply.

Hugh had written to convey his

good wishes for Christmas, and this she explained to Jeff; but he received her explanation in utter silence, and she forthwith abandoned the subject. A smouldering resentment began to burn within her. What right had he to treat Hugh's friendship with her as a thing to be ashamed of? She longed to ask him,

but would not risk an open rupture. She knew that if she gave her indignation rein she would not be able to control it.

So the matter passed, and she slipped Hugh's note into her bosom with a sense of outraged pride that went with her throughout the day. It was still present with her like an evil spirit

when she went to her room to dress.

She had not much time at her disposal, and she slipped into her black evening gown with a passing wonder as to how Jeff's friends would be attired. Descending again, she found Jim Dawlish fixing a piece of mistletoe over the parlour door,

and smiled at his occupation.

He smiled at her in a fashion that sent the blood suddenly and hotly to her face, and she passed on to the kitchen, erect and quivering with anger.

"Lor', my dearie, what a pretty picture you be, to be sure!" was Granny Grimshaw's greeting, and again a tremor

of misgiving went through the girl's heart. Had she made herself too pretty for the occasion?

She mustered spirit, however, to laugh at the compliment, and busied herself with the final arrangements.

Jeff appeared a few minutes later, clad in black but not in evening dress. His

eyes dwelt upon his wife for a moment or two before he addressed her.

"Do you mind being in the parlour when they come in?"

She looked up at him with a smile which she knew to be forced. "Are you sure I shan't be one too many, Jeff?"

"Quite," said Jeff.

There was no appealing against that, and she accompanied him without further words.

Jim Dawlish was standing by the parlour door, admiring his handiwork. He nudged Jeff as he went by, and was rewarded by Jeff's heaviest scowl.

A minute later, to

Doris's mingled relief and dread, came the sounds of the first arrival.

This proved to be a Mr. Griggs and his son, a horsey young man, whom she vaguely knew by sight, having encountered him when following the hounds. Mr. Griggs was a jolly old farmer, with a somewhat convivial countenance. He shook her warmly by the hand, and asked her how she liked being married.

Doris was endeavouring to reply to
this difficult question
as airily as possible,
when three more of
Jeff's friends made
their appearance, and
were brought up by
Jeff in a group for

introduction, thereby relieving her of the obligation.

The party was now complete, and they all sat down to supper in varying degrees of shyness. Doris worked hard to play her part as hostess, but it was certainly no light task. Two of the last-comers were brothers of

the name of Chubb, and from neither of these could she extract more than one word at a time. The third, Farmer Locke, was of the aggressive, bulldog type, and he very speedily asserted himself. He seemed, indeed, somewhat inclined to browbeat her, loudly arguing her slightest remark after a fashion which

she found decidedly exasperating, but presently discovered to be his invariable habit with everyone. He flatly contradicted even Jeff, but she was pleased to hear Jeff bluntly hold his own, and secretly admired him for the achievement.

On the whole, the meal was not quite so much of an ordeal as

she had anticipated, and she was just beginning to congratulate herself upon this fact when she discovered that young Griggs was ogling her with most unmistakable familiarity whenever she glanced his way. She at once cut him pointedly and with supreme disdain, only to find his father, who was seated on her

right, doing exactly the same thing.

Furious indignation entered her sore soul at this second discovery, and from the smiling, genial hostess she froze into a marble statue of aloofness. But tongues were loosened somewhat by that time, and her change of attitude did not apparently affect

the guests.

Mr. Locke continued his aggressive course, and the brothers Chubb were emboldened to take it by turns to oppose him, while old Griggs drank deeply and smacked his lips, and young Griggs told Jeff anecdotes in an undertone which he interspersed with bold glances in

the direction of his stony-faced young hostess.

The appearance of Jim Dawlish carrying a steaming bowl of punch seemed to Doris at length the signal for departure, and she rose from the table.

Jeff instantly rose at the farther end, and she divined that he had no wish to detain her. Mr. Griggs the elder, on the other hand, was loud in protest.

"We haven't drunk your health yet, missis," he said.

She forced herself to smile. "That is very kind of you. I am sure Jeff will return thanks for me."

She made it evident that she

had no intention of remaining, protest notwithstanding, so Mr. Griggs arose and turned to open the door, still loudly deploring her departure. Young Griggs was already there, however. He leered at her as she approached him, and it occurred to her that he was not very steady on his legs. She prepared him an

icy bow, which she was in the very act of executing when he made a sudden lurch forward, and caught her round the waist. She heard him laugh with coarse mirth, and had a glimpse of the bunch of mistletoe dangling above their heads ere she fiercely pushed him from her into the passage.

The next instant Jeff was beside her, and she turned and clung to him in desperation.

"Jeff, don't let him!" she cried.

Jeff stretched out an arm to keep the young man back. A roar of laughter rose from the remaining guests.

"Kiss her yourself then, Jeff!" cried old

Griggs, hammering on the table. "You've got her under the mistletoe."

"He daren't!" said Jim Dawlish, with a wink.

"Afraid to kiss his own wife!" gibed Locke, and the Chubb brothers laughed in uproarious appreciation of the sally.

It was then that Doris became aware of a

change in Jeff. The arm he had stretched out for her protection suddenly encircled her. He bent his face to hers.

"They shan't say that!" he muttered under his breath.

She divined his intention in an instant, and a wild flame of anger shot up within her. This was how he treated

her confidence!
She made a swift
effort to wrench
herself from him,
then, feeling his arm
tighten to frustrate
her, she struck him
across the face in
frantic indignation.

Again a roar of laughter arose behind them, and then very suddenly she forgot everyone in the world but Jeff, for

it was as if at that blow of hers an evil spirit had taken swift possession of him. He gripped her hands with savage strength, forcing them behind her, and so holding her, with eyes that seared her soul, he kissed her passionately, violently, devouringly, on face and neck and throat, sparing her not a whit, till in an agony

of helpless shame she sank powerless in his arms.

She heard again the jeering laughter in the room behind her, but between herself and Jeff there was a terrible silence, till abruptly he set her free, saying curtly, "You brought it on yourself. Now go!"

Her knees were shaking under her.

She was burning from head to foot, as though she had been wrapped in flame. But with an effort she controlled herself.

She went in utter silence, feeling as if her heart were dead within her, mounted the stairs with growing weakness, found and fumbled at her own door, entered at last, and

sank inert upon the floor.

CHAPTER XI CHRISTMAS MORNING

Christmas morning broke with a sprinkle of snow, and an icy wind that blew from the north, promising a heavier fall ere the day was over.

Jeff was late in descending, and he saw that the door of Doris's room was open as he passed. He glanced in, saw that the room was empty, and entered to lay a packet that he carried on her dressing-table. As he did so, his eyes fell upon an envelope lying there, and that single glance revealed the fact that it was

addressed to him.

He picked it up, and, turning, cast a searching look around the room. Across the end of the great four-poster bed hung the black lace gown she had worn the previous evening, but the bed itself was undisturbed. He saw in a moment that it had not been slept in. Sharply he turned

to the envelope in his hand, and ripped it open. Something bright rolled out upon the floor. He stopped it with his foot. It was her wedding-ring.

An awful look showed for a moment in Jeff's eyes and passed. He stooped and picked up the ring; then, with a species of deadly composure more

terrible than any agitation, he took out the letter that the envelope contained.

It was very short—
the first letter that
she had ever written
to him.

"Dear Jeff," it ran,
"after what happened
last night, I do not
think you will be
surprised to hear that
I feel I cannot stay
any longer under your

roof. I have tried to be friends with you, but you would not have it so, and now it has become quite impossible for me to go on. I am leaving for town by the first train I can catch. I am going to work for my living, and some day I shall hope to make good to you all that I know you have spent on my comfort.

"Please do not imagine I am going in anger. I blame myself more than I blame you. I never ought to have married you, knowing that I did not love you in the ordinary way. But this is the only course open to me now. So good-bye!

"Doris."

Jeff Ironside looked up from the letter,

and out across the grey meadows. His face was pale, the square jaw absolutely rigid; but there was no anger in his eyes, only the iron of an implacable determination. For several seconds he watched the feathery snowflakes drifting over the fields; then, with absolute steadiness, he returned both

letter and ring to the envelope, placed them in his pocket, and, turning, left the room.

Granny Grimshaw met him at the foot of the stairs. "Oh, Master Jeff," she said, "I am that worried. We can't find Mrs. Ironside."

Jeff paused an instant and turned his grim face to her. "It's all right, Granny. I know where she is," he said. "Keep the breakfast hot!"

And with that he was gone.

He drove out of the yard a few minutes later in his dog-cart, muffled in a great coat with the collar up to his ears.

At the station, Doris sat huddled in a

corner of the little waiting-room counting the dreary minutes as she waited for her train. No one beside herself was going by it.

She had walked across the fields, and had made a détour to leave a note at the Manor for Hugh. She could not leave Hugh in ignorance of her action.

She glanced nervously at the watch on her wrist. Yes, Jeff probably knew by this time. How was he taking it? Was he very angry? But surely even he must see how impossible he had made her life with him.

Restlessly she arose and went to the window. It had

begun to snow in earnest. The road was all blurred and grey with the falling flakes. She shivered again. Her feet were like ice. Very oddly her thoughts turned to that day in September when Jeff had knelt before her and drawn off her muddy boots before the great open fire. A great sigh welled up within her

and her eyes filled with quick tears. If only he would have consented to be her friend. She was so lonely—so lonely!

There came the sound of wheels along the road, and she turned away. Evidently someone else was coming for the train. A little tremor of impatience went through her.

Would the train never come?

The wheels stopped before the station door. Someone descended, and there followed the sound of a man's feet approaching her retreat. A hand was laid upon the door, and she braced herself to meet a possible acquaintance. It opened, and she glanced up.

"Oh, Jeff!" she said.

He shut the door behind him and came forward. His face was set in dogged, unyielding lines.

"I have come to take you back," he said.

She drew sharply away from him. This was the last thing she had expected.

Desperately she faced him. "I can't come with you, Jeff," she said. "My mind is quite made up. I am very sorry for everything, especially sorry that you have taken the trouble to follow me. But my decision is quite unalterable."

Her breath came fast as she ended. Her heart was

throbbing in thick, heavy strokes. There was something so implacable in his attitude.

He did not speak at once, and she stood before him, striving with all her strength to still her agitation. Then quite calmly he stood back and motioned her to pass him. "Whatever you decide to do

afterwards," he said,
"you must come back
with me now. We had
better start at once
before it gets worse."

A quiver of anger went through her; it was almost a sensation of hatred. She remained motionless. "I refuse," she said in a low voice, her grey eyes steadily raised to his.

She saw his black brows meet, but he gave no sign of impatience. "And I—insist," he said stubbornly.

She felt the blood receding from her face. It was to be open conflict, then. She collected all her resolution to oppose him, for to yield at that moment was out of the question.

It was then, while she stood summoning her forces, that there came to her ears the distant hum and throb of an approaching train. It was coming at last. A porter ran past the window that looked upon the platform, announcing its approach with a dismal yell. Doris straightened and turned to go.

Jeff turned also. An odd light sprang up in his gipsy eyes. He went straight to the door ere she could reach it, locked it, and withdrew the key.

That fired Doris. Her composure went in a single instant. "Jeff," she exclaimed, "how dare you?"

He turned to the dingy window

"You compel me," he said.

She sank back impotent against the table. He stood staring grimly forth, filling the window with his bulk.

Nearer came the train and nearer. Doris felt the hot blood drumming in her brain. Something that was very nearly akin to

frenzy entered into her. She stood up with sudden, fierce resolution.

"Jeff," she said, "I will not be kept here against my will! Do you hear? I will not! Give me that key!"

He took no more notice of the command than if it had been the buzzing of a fly. His attention apparently was

caught by something outside. He leaned forward, watching intently.

Something in his attitude checked her wrath at its height. It was as though a cold hand had been laid upon her heart. What was it he was looking at? She felt she must know. As the train thundered into the station she went to

his side and looked forth also.

The next moment, with a shock that was physical, she saw the object of his interest. Hugh Chesyl, with a face of grave perturbation, was standing on the platform, searching this way and that. It was evident that he had but just arrived at the station, and in a

flash she divined the reason of his coming. Quite obviously he was looking for her.

Sharply she withdrew herself from the window, and in the same moment Jeff also turned. Their eyes met, and Doris caught her breath.

For it was as if a sword had pierced her. In a single, blinding instant of

revelation she read his thought, and sheer horror held her silent before him. She stood as one paralyzed.

He did not utter a word, simply stood and looked at her, with eyes grown devilish in their scrutiny. Then very suddenly and terribly he laughed, and flung round upon his heel.

In that instant Doris's powers returned to her, urged by appalling necessity. She sprang forward, reached the door, set her back against it, faced him with the wild courage of agonizing fear.

"Jeff! Jeff!" she panted. "What are you going to do?"

The train had come to a standstill. There

was a commotion of voices and running feet. Jeff, still with that awful look in his eyes, stood still.

"You will miss your train," he said.

"What are you going to do?" she reiterated.

He smiled—a grim, dreadful smile. "I am going to see you off. You can go now. Your

friend Chesyl can follow by the next train—when I have done with him."

He had the key in his hand. He stooped to insert it in the lock. But swiftly she caught his wrist. "Jeff, stop—stop!" she gasped; and, as he looked at her: "I'm not going away now!"

He wrung his hand free. "You had better

go—for your own sake!" he said.

She flinched in spite of herself from the blazing menace of his eyes, but again necessity spurred her. She stretched out her arms, barring his way.

"I won't! I can't!

Jeff—Jeff—for

Heaven's sake—Jeff!"

Her voice broke into
wild entreaty. He had

taken her roughly by the shoulders, pulling her from his path. He would have put her from him, but she snatched her opportunity and clung to him fast with all her quivering strength.

He stood still then, suddenly rigid. "I have warned you!" he said, in a voice so deep with passion

that her heart quailed and ceased to beat.

"Let me go!"

But she only tightened her trembling hold. "You shan't go, Jeff! You shan't insult Hugh Chesyl! He is a gentleman!"

"Is he?" said Jeff, very bitterly.

She could feel his

every muscle strung and taut, ready for uncontrolled violence. Yet still with her puny strength she held him, for she dared not let him go.

"Jeff, listen to me!
You must listen!
Hugh is my very
good friend—no more
than that. He has
come here to say
'Good-bye.' I left a
note for him on my

way here, just to tell him I was going. He is my friend—only my friend."

"I don't believe you," said Jeff.

She shrank as if he had struck her, but her hands still clutched his coat. She attempted no further protestations, only stood with her white face lifted and clear eyes fixed on

his. The red fire that shone fiercely back on her was powerless to subdue her steady regard, though she felt as though it scorched her through and through.

From the platform came the shriek of the guard's whistle. The train was departing.

Doris heard it go with a sick sense of

despair. She knew that her liberty went with it. As the last carriage passed she spoke again.

"I will go back with you now."

"If I will take you back," said Jeff.

Her hands clenched upon his coat. An awful weakness had begun to assail her. She fought against it

desperately.

Someone tried the handle of the door, pulled at it and desisted. She caught her breath. Jeff's hand went out to open, but she shifted her grasp, and again gripped his wrist.

"Wait! Wait!" she whispered through her white lips.

This time he did not

shake her off. He stood with his eyes on hers and waited.

The man on the other side of the door, evidently concluding that the waiting-room had not been opened that day, gave up the attempt and passed on. With straining ears Doris listened to his departing footsteps. A few seconds later she saw Jeff's eyes go to the farther window. Her own followed them. Hugh Chesyl, clad in a long grey ulster, was tramping away through the snow.

He passed from sight, and Doris relaxed her hold. Her face was white and spent. "Will you take me home?" she said faintly.

Slowly Jeff's eyes came back to her,

dwelt upon her. He must have seen the exhaustion in her face, but his own showed no softening.

He spoke at last sternly, with grim mastery. "If I take you back it must be on a different footing. You tell me this man is no more to you than a friend. I am even less. Do you think I will be

satisfied with that?"

"I have tried to make you my friend," she said.

"And you have failed," he said. "Shall I tell you why? Or can you guess?"

She was silent.

He clenched his hands hard against his sides. "You know what happened yesterday,"

he said. "It had nearly happened a hundred times before. I kept it back till it got too strong for me. You dangled your friendship before me till I was nearly mad with the want of you. You had better have offered me nothing at all than that."

"Oh, Jeff!" she said.

He went on, heedless of reproach. "It has

come to this with me: friendship, if it comes at all, must come after. You tell me Chesyl is not your lover. Do you deny that he has ever made love to you?"

"Since he knew of my marriage—never!" she said.

"Yet you ride home with him in the dark hand in hand!" said Jeff.

The colour flamed in her face and as swiftly died. "Hugh Chesyl is not my lover," she said proudly.

"And you expect me to believe you?" he said.

"I do."

He gazed at her without pity. "You will secure my belief in you," he said, "only

by coming to me as my wife."

A great shiver went through her. She stood silent.

"As my wife," he repeated looking straight into her face with eyes that compelled. She was trembling from head to foot. He waited a moment, then: "You would sooner run away with Hugh

Chesyl?" he asked very bitterly.

Sheer pain drove her into speech. "Oh, Jeff," she cried passionately, "don't make me hate you!"

He started at that as an animal starts at the goad, and in an instant he took her suddenly and fiercely by the shoulders. "Hate me, then! Hate me!" he

said, and kissed her again savagely on her white, panting lips as he had kissed her the night before, showing no mercy.

She did not resist him. Her strength was gone. She hung quivering in his arms till the storm of his passion had passed also. Then: "Let us go!" she whispered: "Let us go!"

He released her slowly and turned to open the door. Then, seeing that she moved unsteadily, he put his arm about her, supporting her. So, side by side and linked together, they went out into the driving snow.

CHAPTER XII
CHRISTMAS NIGHT

Doris was nearly fainting with cold and misery when they stopped at last before the Mill House door. All the previous night she had sat up listening with nerves on edge, and had finally taken her departure in the early morning without food.

When Jeff turned to help her down she looked at him helplessly, seeing him through a drifting mist that obscured all besides. He saw her weakness at a single glance, and, mounting the step, took her in his arms.

She sank down against his shoulder. "Oh, Jeff, I can't help it," she whispered, through lips that were stiff and blue with cold.

"All right. I know," he said, and for the first time in many days she heard a note of kindness in his voice.

He bore her straight through to the kitchen, and laid her down upon the old oak settle, just as he had done on that day in September when first he had brought her to his home.

Granny Grimshaw, full

of tender solicitude, came hastening to her, but Jeff intervened.

"Hot milk and brandy—quick!" he ordered, and fell himself to chafing the icy fingers.

When Granny
Grimshaw brought
the cup, he took it
from her, and held
it for Doris to drink;
and then, when she

had swallowed a little and the blood was creeping back into her face, he took off her boots and chafed her feet also.

Granny Grimshaw put some bread into the milk while this was in progress and coaxed Doris to finish it. She asked no questions, simply treating her as she might have treated a lost child

who had strayed away. There was a vast fund of wisdom in the old grey head that was so often shaken over the follies of youth.

And, finally, when Doris had a little recovered, she went with her to her room, and helped her to bed, where she tucked her up with her own hot-water

bottle and left her.

From sheer exhaustion Doris slept, though her sleep was not a happy one. Long, tangled dreams wound in a ceaseless procession through her brain, and through them all she was persistently and fruitlessly striving to persuade Jeff to let her go.

In the late afternoon she awoke suddenly to the sound of men's voices in the room below her, and started up in nameless fear.

"Were you wanting anything, my dearie?" asked Granny Grimshaw, from a chair by the fire.

"Who is that talking?" she asked nervously.

"It's Master Jeff and a visitor," said the old woman. "Now, don't you bother your head about them! I'm going along to get you some tea."

She bustled away with the words, and Doris lay back, listening with every nerve stretched. Her husband's deep voice was unmistakable, but the other she could

not distinguish. Only after a while there came the sounds of movement, the opening of a door.

When that happened she sprang swiftly from the bed to her own door, and softly opened it.

Two men stood in the hall below. Slipping out on to the landing, she leaned upon the banisters in the

darkness and looked down. Even as she did so, a voice she knew well came up out of the gloom—a kindly, well-bred voice that spoke with a slight drawl.

"I shouldn't be downhearted, Ironside. Remember, no one is cornered so long as he can turn round and go back. It's the only thing to

do when you know you've taken a wrong turning."

Doris caught her breath. Her fingers gripped the black oak rail. She listened in rigid expectancy for Jeff's answer. But no answer came.

In a moment Hugh's voice came again, still calm and friendly. "I'm going away directly. The Squire

has been ordered to the South for the rest of the winter, and I've promised to go with him. I suppose we shall start some time next week. May I look in and say 'Good-bye'?"

There was a pause.
The girl on the landing above waited tensely for Jeff's answer. It came at last slowly, in

a tone that was not unfriendly, but which did not sound spontaneous. "You can do as you like, Chesyl. I have no objection."

"All right, then.
Good-bye for the
present! I hope when
I do come I shall find
that all's well. All will
be well in the end,
eh, Jeff?"

There was a touch

of feeling in the question that made Doris aware that the speaker had gripped her husband's hand.

But again there was a pause before the answer came, heavily, it seemed reluctantly: "Yes, it'll be all right for her in the end. Good-bye!"

The front-door opened; they went out into the porch

together. And Doris slipped back, to her room.

Those last words of her husband's rang strangely in her heart. Why had he put it like that?

Her thoughts went to Hugh—dear and faithful friend who had taken this step on her behalf. What had passed between him and her husband

during that interview in the parlour? She longed to know.

But whatever it had been, Hugh had emerged victorious. He had destroyed those foul suspicions of Jeff's. He had conquered the man's enmity, overthrown his passionate jealousy, humbled him into admitting himself to be in the wrong.

Very curiously that silent admission of Jeff's hurt her pride almost as if it had been made on her behalf. The thought of Jeff worsted by Hugh Chesyl, however deeply in the wrong he might be, was somehow very hard to bear. Her heart ached for the man. She did not want him to be humbled.

When Granny
Grimshaw came up
with her tea, she was
half-dressed.

"I couldn't sleep any longer," she said. "It's dear of you to take such care of me. But I'm quite all right. Dear Granny, forgive me for giving you such a horrible Christmas Day!" She bent suddenly forward and kissed

the wrinkled face.

"My dearie! My dearie!" said Granny Grimshaw.

And then, exactly how it happened neither of them ever knew, all in a moment Doris found herself folded close in the old woman's arms, sobbing her heart out on the motherly shoulder.

"You shouldn't cry, darling; you shouldn't cry," murmured Granny Grimshaw, softly patting the slim young form. "It would hurt Master Jeff more than anything to have you cry."

"No, no! He doesn't really care for me. I could bear it better if he did," whispered Doris.

"Not care for you, my dearie? Why, what ever can you be thinking of?" protested Granny Grimshaw. "He's eating his very heart out for you, and I verily believe he'd kill himself sooner than make you unhappy."

"Ah! You don't understand," sighed Doris. "He only

wants—material things."

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" said Granny Grimshaw. "Did you suppose that the man ever lived who could love a woman without? We're human, dear, the very best of us, and there's no getting out of it. Besides, love is never satisfied with half measures."

She drew the girl down into the chair before the fire and fussed over her tenderly till she grew calmer. And then presently she slipped away.

Doris finished her tea slowly with her eyes on the red coals, then rose at length to continue her dressing. As she stood at the table twisting up her

hair, her glance fell on a small packet that lay there.

With fingers that trembled a little she opened it. It contained a small object wrapped in a slip of paper. There was writing upon it, which she deciphered as she unrolled it. "For my wife, with all my love. Jeff." And in her hand there lay

a slender gold ring, exquisitely dainty, set with pearls. A quick tremor went through Doris. She guessed that it had belonged to his mother.

Again she read the few simple words; they seemed to her to hold an appeal which the man himself could never have uttered, and

her heart quivered in response as a finely tempered instrument vibrates to a sudden sound. Had she never understood him?

She finished her dressing with impulsive haste, and with Jeff's gift in her hand turned to leave the room.

Her heart throbbed violently as she descended.

What would his mood be when she found him? If he would only be kind to her! Ah, if only he would be kind! Granny Grimshaw was lighting the lamps in the hall and parlour.

"Everyone's out but me," she said. "Master Jeff and I generally keep house alone together on Christmas night. I don't know why he doesn't come in. He went out to see to the horses half an hour ago. He hasn't had his tea yet."

"I will give him his tea," Doris said.

"Very well," said Granny Grimshaw. "I'll leave the kettle on for you while I go up and dress."

Doris went into the

parlour to wait. The lamp on the table was alight, the teacups ready, and a bright fire made the room cosy. She went to the window and drew aside the curtain.

The snow had ceased, and the sky was clear. Stars were beginning to pierce the darkness.

Slowly the minutes crawled by. She

began to listen for his coming, to chafe at his delay. At last, grown nervous with suspense, she turned from the window and went into the hall. She opened the door and stepped out into the porch.

Still and starlit lay the path before her. The snow had been swept away. Impulse seized her. She felt she could wait no longer. She slipped back into the hall, took a coat of Jeff's from a peg, put it on, and so passed out into the open.

The way to the stable lay past the mill-stream. On noiseless feet she followed it. The water was deep and dark and silent. She shivered as she drew near. In

the stable beyond, close to the mill, she saw a light. It was moving towards her. In a moment she discovered Jeff's face above it, andwas it something she actually saw in the face, or was it an illusion created by the swinging lantern?—her heart gave a sudden jerk of horror. For it was to her as if she looked

upon the face of a dead man.

She stood still in the shadow of a weeping willow, arrested by that look, and watched him come slowly forth.

He moved heavily as one driven by Fate, pulling the stable door to after him. This he turned to lock, then stooped, still with that face as

of a death-mask, and deliberately extinguished his lantern.

Doris's heart jerked again at the action, and every pulse began to clamour. Why did he put out the lantern before reaching the house?

The next moment she heard his footsteps, slow and heavy, coming towards her. The path wound

along a bank a couple of feet above the millstream. He approached till in the darkness he had nearly reached her, then he stopped.

She thought he had discerned her, but the next moment she realized that he had not. He was facing the water; he seemed to be staring across it. And even as she

watched he took another step straight towards it.

It was then that like a flashlight leaping from his brain to hers she realized what he was about to do. How the knowledge came to her she knew not, but it was hers past all disputing in that single second of blinding revelation. And just as that

morning she had been inspired to act on sheer wild impulse, so now without an instant's pause she acted again. She sprang from her hiding-place with a strangled cry, and threw her arms about him.

"Jeff! Jeff! What are you doing here?"

He gave a great start that made her

think of a frightened animal, and stood still. She felt his arms grow rigid at his sides, and knew that his hands were clenched.

"Jeff!" she cried again, clinging faster. "You—you're never thinking of—of that?"

Her utterance ended in a shudder as she sought with all her strength to drag him

away from the icy water.

He resisted her doggedly, standing like a rock.
"Whatever I'm thinking of doing is my affair," he said, shortly and sternly.
"Go away and leave me alone!"

"I won't!" she cried back to him half-hys-terically. "I won't! If—if you're going to

do that, you'll take me with you!"

He turned round then and moved back to the path. "Who said I was going to do anything?" he demanded in a voice that sounded half-angry and half-ashamed.

She answered him with absolute candour. "I saw your face just

now. I couldn't help knowing. Oh, Jeff, Jeff! is it as bad as that? Do you hate me so badly as that?"

He made a movement of the arms that was curiously passionate, but he did not attempt to take her into them. "I don't hate you," he said, in a voice that sounded half-choked. "I love you—so

horribly"—there was a note of ferocity in the low-spoken words-"that I can never know any peace without you! And since with you it is otherwise, what remedy is there? You love Hugh Chesyl. You only want to be free to marry him. While I—"

He broke off in fierce impotence, and began

to thrust her from him. But she held him fast.

"Jeff-Jeff, this is madness! Listen to me! You must listen! Hugh and I are friends, and we shall never be anything more. Jeff, let me be with you! Teach me to love you! You can if you will. Don'tdon't ruin both our lives!"

She was pleading with him passionately, still holding him back. And, as she pleaded, she reached up her arms and slowly clasped his neck.

"Oh, Jeff, be good to me—be good to me just this once!" she prayed. "I've made such a hideous mistake, but don't punish me like this! I swear if you go, I shall go too! There'll be nothing left to live for. Jeff—Jeff, if you really love me, spare me this!"

The broken entreaty went into agonized sobbing, yet she kept her face upraised to his. Instinctively she knew that in that eleventh hour she must offer all she had.

Several moments

throbbed away. She began to think that she had failed. And then very suddenly he moved, put his arm about her, led her away.

Not a word did he utter, but there was comfort in the holding of his arm. She went with him with the curious hushed sense of one who stands on the threshold of that

which is sacred.

CHAPTER XIII A FARMER'S WIFE

Two eyes, old but yet keen, peered forth into the wintry night, and a grey head nodded approvingly, as Jeff Ironside and his wife came in silence to their home. And then the bedroom blind

Granny Grimshaw sat down cosily by her bit of wood fire to hold a strictly private little service of thanksgiving.

Downstairs into the raftered kitchen two people came, each holding each, both speechless, with a restraint that bound them as by a spell.

By nature the woman

spoke first, her voice no more than a whisper. "Sit on the settle, won't you? I'm going to get your tea."

His arm fell from her.
He sat down heavily,
not looking at her.
She stepped to the
fire and took the
empty teapot from
the hob, then lightfooted to the dresser
for the tea.

He did not watch her. For a while he sat staring blindly straight before him. Then slowly he leaned forward, and dropped his head into his hands.

Not till the tea was made did she so much as glance towards him, so intent to all seeming was she upon her task. But when it was done,

she looked at him sitting there bowed upon the settle, and very suddenly, very lightly, she came to his side.

"Jeff!" she said.

He neither moved nor spoke.

She laid a shy hand on his shoulder. "Jeff!" Her voice was pleading and rather breathless,

as though she would ask him to bear with her. "I want to thank you so much—so very much—for your Christmas gift. See! I'm wearing it."

She slipped her hand down into his, so that he held it pressed against his cheek. He spoke no word, but against her fingers she felt a quiver.

She bent over him,

growing bolder. "Jeff, I—I want you to give me back—my wedding-ring."

He did not stir or answer.

"Please!" she whispered. "Won't you?"

And then dumbly, keeping his face hidden, he drew her hand down to his breast-pocket.

"Is it there?" she whispered. "May I take it?"

Her fingers felt for and found what they sought. Her hand came up again, wearing the ring. And then, with a swift, impulsive movement she knelt before him, clasping his two wrists.

"Jeff—Jeff! will you try to

forgive me?"

There followed silence, but very strangely no misgiving assailed her. She strove with gentle insistence to draw the shielding hands away.

At first he resisted her, and then very suddenly he yielded. His hands went out to her, his head dropped forward upon her

shoulder. A strangled sob shook him.

And Doris knelt up with all her woman's compassion leaping to his need, and clasped her warm arms about him, holding him to her heart.

That broke him, broke him utterly, so that for a while no words could pass between them. For Doris was crying

too, even while she sought to comfort.

But at last, with a valiant effort, she checked her tears. "Jeff-darling, don't let us be so-so silly," she murmured, with one quivering hand laid upon his head. "We've got all we want—both of us. Let's forget it all! Let's begin again!"

He put his arms

around her, not lifting his head.

"Can't we?" she said softly. "I'm ready."

He spoke at last below his breath. "You couldn't! You'll never forget what a brute I've been."

She turned her head quickly and laid her cheek against his forehead. "Shall I tell you just how

much I am going to remember?"

He was silent, breathing deeply.

"Just this," she said. "That you love me-so much-that you can't do without me, and that you were willing—to give your life—for my happiness. That is what I am going to remember, Jeff, and it will be a very

precious memory. And I want to tell you just one little thing before we go any farther. It's about Hugh. I don't love him in the way that you and I count love. I did very nearly for a little while. But that is over. I don't think—I never have quite thought—that he is altogether my sort, or I his. Jeff dear, you believe

that?"

"Yes," said Jeff.

"Thank you," she said simply. "I want you to try and believe me always, because I do tell the truth. And now, Jeff, I've got to tell you that I'm dreadfully sorry for the way I've treated you. Yes, let me say it," as he made a quick movement of protest. "It's

true. I've treated you abominably, mainly because I didn't understand. I do understand now. You—you've opened my eyes. Oh, Jeff, thank God they were opened even at the eleventh hour! What should I have done if-if-" She broke off with a shiver, and then nestled to him like a child, as though that were the end of

the argument. "And now I'm going to be such a good wife to you," she whispered, "to make up for it all. I always wanted to be a farmer's wife, you know. But you must help me. Jeff, will you?"

"I would die for you," he said, his head still bent as though he could not wholly trust himself to look her in

the face.

She gave a funny little tremulous laugh. "Yes, I know. But that wouldn't be a bit of good. You would only break my heart. You don't want to do that, do you?"

"Doris!" he said.

"Why won't you call me Dot?"

"Dot!" said Jeff very

softly.

"That's better." Again her voice quivered upon a laugh. Her arms slackened from his shoulders, and instantly his fell away, setting her free. She rose to her feet, yet lingered a moment, bending slightly over him, her eyes very bright.

But Jeff did not

move, and with a half-sigh she turned away. "Would you like to carry the teapot?" she said.

He got up.

"And you can hang up this coat of yours," she added. "I'll come in a moment."

She watched him go in his slow, strong fashion; then for a few still seconds she

stood quite tense with hands tightly gripped together. What passed within her during those moments only her own heart ever knew, how much of longing, how much of regret, how much of earnest, quivering hope.

She followed him almost at once as she had promised.

The parlour door was

open. She came to it in her light, impetuous way. She halted on the threshold.

"Jeff!" she said. "Come here!"

She reached out her hands to him—little, nervous hands full of purpose. She drew him close. She raised her lips to his. The mistletoe dangled above their heads.

"Will you kiss me, Jeff?" she whispered.

He stooped, half-hesitating.

Her arms stole about his neck. "You needn't-ever-be afraid to kiss your own wife, dear," she said. "I want your love just in the ordinary way—the ordinary way."

He held her to him.

"Dot—Dot—forgive me!"

She shook her head with frank, fearless eyes raised to his. "It was a bad bargain, Jeff. Forget it!"

"And make another?" he suggested.

To which she answered with her quick smile. "Love makes no bargains, Jeff. Love just

gives—and gives and gives."

And as his lips met hers he knew the wondrous truth of what she said. For in that one long kiss she gave him all she had. And love conquered, just in the old, sweet, ordinary way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ETHEL M. DELL has delighted millions around the world with her best selling stories of love and longing. A shy and private person, she was forty when she married the love her life, a solider named Gerald Tahourdin Savage.

ABOUT THE COVER

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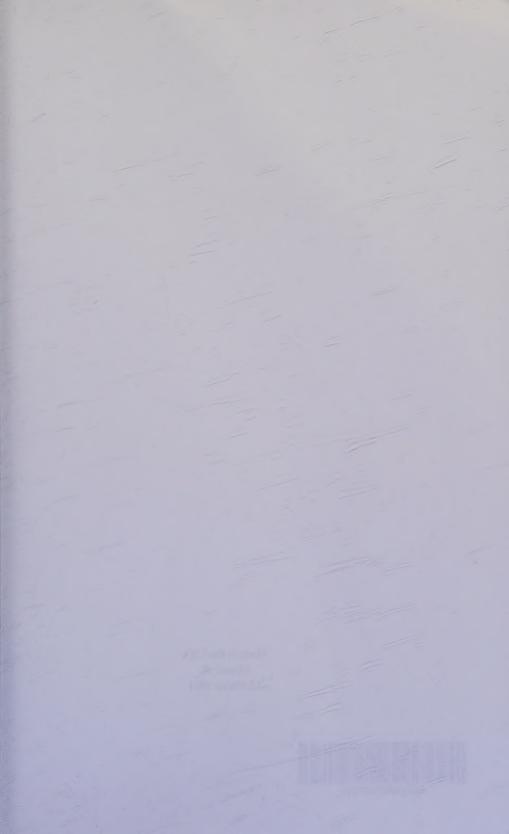


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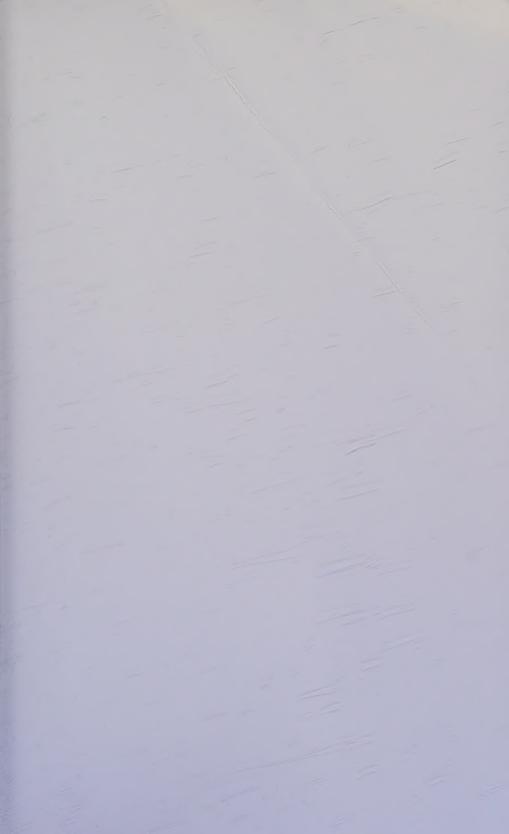
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SUPER LARGE PRINT

ROMANCE

Jeff Ironside is
everything Hugh Chesyl
is not cilent, intense,
passionate. But Doris
has been friends with
Hugh all her life, can
she risk wanting more?

